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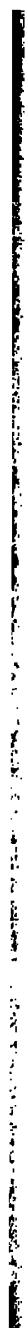


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IS FRIEND AND HIS WIFE

By Cosmo Hamilton

THE SINS OF THE CHILDREN

THE BLINDNESS OF VIRTUE

THE DOOR THAT HAS NO KEY

THE MIRACLE OF LOVE

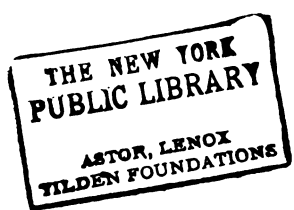
A PLEA FOR THE YOUNGER GENERATION

JOAN AND THE BABIES AND I

SCANDAL

WHO CARES ?

HIS FRIEND AND HIS WIFE





Suddenly, having come over the lawn with the swiftness of an Indian, Julian stood at her elbow.

FRONTISPIECE. *See page 30.*

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S FRIEND AND HIS WIFE

NOVEL OF THE QUAKER HILL COLONY

BY
COSMO HAMILTON

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY
ROBERT W. STEWART

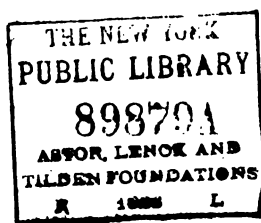


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1920

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LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

Suddenly, having come over the lawn with
the swiftness of an Indian, Julian
stood at her elbow . . . *Frontispiece*

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“Will you make me your wife in spite of the
fact that I have just lied like a thief?” ” 162

Weeping and on her knees,—that was how
a stealer of husbands should be . . . ” 231



HIS FRIEND AND HIS WIFE

CHAPTER I

DEMOBILIZED but not demoralized, Gilbert Carlton was taking a short holiday before going back into the maelstrom of Wall Street. His year and a half in the army had done for him what all his schooling and all his memorable years at Harvard had failed to accomplish. Lean and fine, he had returned from six months in the trenches with the sense of responsibility that is achieved only by having been in command of men and the sense of discipline that is won only by the ability to take orders. How pleasant to be in the slackness of a sport shirt and white flannels once more! How delightful to put in two and a half rounds of golf a day

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and find that he had not lost his length and direction! How very enjoyable, being human, to be made something of a hero in the homes of his friends in the Quaker Hill Colony, to be able to dilate upon the grit and pluck of the men of his regiment, and to have the intense satisfaction of knowing that he had done something to add to its honor and gallantry!

It was with an inarticulate gratitude for being alive and whole, and with an appreciation for the quiet charm and beauty of Quaker Hill never recognized before, that young Gilbert left the country club at four o'clock and swung down the road which led to his sister's pretty house. He would have preferred to play until it was too dark to see the ball, but something in Marjorie's eyes when she had mentioned the fact that Doris Clayton, Susan Kester and Nina Hopper were coming to tea had stuck in his memory. It was good to have a sister and good indeed to be able to hand around her teacups without the aid of a crutch or the strange inconvenience of a cork leg.

There was no laughter among the girls who

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were on the veranda grouped about the slim, white-clad figure of Mrs. Holbrook. Instead there was an undercurrent of excitement in their conversation and a sudden and intriguing silence as he came up. The pretty Mrs. Hopper, with her wide brown eyes and tip-tilted nose, and teeth that flashed like an electric advertisement, looked like the heroine of a play, with her hands clasped together and rather more than a charming ankle showing beneath a skirt of many stripes. Susan Kester, the two-years wife of a man who had dropped money-making to go into the Canadian Expeditionary Force at the outbreak of war, and whose everlasting place in the pockmarked fields round Ypres was unidentified among all those small white crosses, had thrown herself also into a theatrical attitude; and Doris Clayton, with her black hair and eyes as blue as a violet, was leaning against one of the white pillars with a totally unusual expression of gravity.

Gilbert's little sister, whose contribution to the Colony now consisted of two chubby chil-

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dren, stopped in the middle of a sentence and waved her hand. "How perfectly sweet of you!" she said. "But we're not having tea here, after all. We're all going around to try and cheer poor old Bob Meredith. We feel we must stand by him in the awful crisis he is going through. Will you come with us, Gilbert?"

The ex-lieutenant brought his hand up to the salute. "What you say goes," he replied. "But what's the row with Bob Meredith?"

Nina Hopper sprang to her feet. "What, have n't you heard? My dear, it's too ghastly for any words."

Gilbert was mystified. He had not been home long enough to acquire all the gossip of the Colony yet. He had, it is true, heard several undertoned remarks on the golf course which led him to suppose that all was not going well in the Meredith home, but he had not endeavored to delve into the subject, having only a slight acquaintance with Bob and his beautiful wife. But here he was among women, and he knew that it would be unnecessary to ask any further questions. All he had to do was

to prepare to receive the inevitable feminine barrage of details and explanations.

Simply because her voice was more penetrating than those of the other young women, and her indignation even greater, Marjorie Holbrook captured his ear. "Gilbert, listen," she said. "At this very moment Margaret Meredith is standing before the referee in New York as corespondent in the divorce suit brought by Daisy Osborn against Julian. It is the first real scandal we've ever had in what the papers call 'the exclusive Quaker Hill Colony.' We've all known that Julian was pretty wild, and that Daisy has had a lot to put up with, but none of us ever dreamed or suspected that Maggie was capable of throwing her bonnet over the mill, especially as she had the luck to be married to such a splendid man as Bob Meredith. The whole thing has disrupted us all. We've just heard over the 'phone that the case is before the referee to-day, and that Bob—you can imagine with what agony and suspense—is waiting up by his house for the verdict; so that's why we're all going around to hold his hand."

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"As he has only got two," said Gilbert a little dryly, "perhaps I shall be in the way."

There was a volley of exclamations, protests and urgings, capped by the definite refusal of them all to go without him. "You are the only man in the place this afternoon," said Mrs. Kester, "and you must come. How would you feel under similar circumstances if Bob refused to give you his moral support?"

Gilbert showed a line of very perfect teeth. "I rather fancy," he said, "that I should be completely off the map if any woman who had married me were in such a mess as this. However, orders are orders. Lead the way, sis."

"Shall we have the car?"

"It's only half a mile."

"Yes, we may as well walk."

"No, I think we'd better drive."

Gilbert burst out laughing.

"Why this mirth?" asked Nina Hopper.

Gilbert looked at pretty little Mrs. Hopper, her pearls gleaming on her fair skin, with a sudden touch of gravity. "I was thinking of a girl from San Francisco whose father wallows

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in millions, who walked fourteen miles every day to the field hospital behind Chateau-Thierry, and who had n't seen any other car except an ambulance for six solid months."

"We'll walk," said Nina, and that settled the point.

The little procession made its way down to the gates and out into a road patterned with the spots of sunlight which percolated through the overhanging branches of the trees on each side. In the pompous and elaborate language of the real estate agent, the Quaker Hill Colony of Connecticut was not only the most exclusive of its kind but the most beautiful. The well-to-do younger set had built houses there designed by the best known architects on sites which caught the silver gleam of the Sound. Its roads were as smooth as a billiard table; its bridle-paths, winding along the edges of thick woods, were unique; its stone walls were neat and symmetrical, and its very rocks had about them a docility and a look of well-being which had not been achieved even by such a well-cultivated place as Greenwich, the million-

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aire village. Even the chickens, which sometimes wandered away from their coops, looked fatter and smarter than the domestic birds of other places; and the high hedges of privet, of which every garden boasted, seemed as though they had been trimmed and cut by barbers. As for the garages dotted down at respectful distances from the houses to which they belonged, they might very easily have been the summer homes of artists and literary men and such like people of erratic means but excellent taste. In fact, the flowery language of real estate pamphlets was fully justified in describing the charm and the beauty of Quaker Hill,—where everybody knew everybody else, where the commuting husbands went into and came back from the city in a luxurious club car, where the children were driven to school in limousines and the servants taken to church in Fords utterly devoid of temperament.

While these typical nice people of this delightful colony made their way to the Meredith house, the discussion as to the dreadful crisis in the lives of two of its most popular members

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continued without interruption. Even Quaker Hill was not, to their surprise, exempt from pain and tragedy, aloof as they considered it to be from all that was sordid and unhappy. At the bend of the road a car passed, and several hands were waved.

"There go the Petersons."

"And Elsa Mahan."

"And Frankie Mundy. I saw her white hair, young face and sympathetic smile. I bet anything we shall meet them at Bob's."

"Poor devil!" said Gilbert.

Nina Hopper, who had not forgotten his gentle snub, turned her brown eyes upon him.

"You've evidently lost the colony spirit," she said. "Don't you know that we all support each other, walk in and out of each other's houses freely, and that every door is open?"

Gilbert fell in step with her a little in advance of the others. "I never had it," he said. "Ever since I've been out of Harvard, I have lived in New York. One can be alone in West Forty-Fourth Street more completely than on

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the Desert of Sahara and can hide one's feelings more thoroughly in the swarm on Fifth Avenue than out on the Gulf Stream. Tell me something: why are we all going to give our moral support to Bob Meredith, when Daisy Osborn must be going through a similar sort of hell and lives only a stone's throw away?"

Nina Hopper slanted her little head. "Yes," she said, "I suppose that does need a little explanation, but this is how we look at it: We all like Daisy; she's a perfect dear, thoroughly one of us and all that; but we don't think that she need have taken her troubles into the open market, so to speak. Julian is a naughty boy—that goes without saying. He's only been married three years, and for all his susceptibility, he couldn't find a prettier girl in the whole country than the one who married him. But just think of this: Daisy, forgetting what it means to us to have a scandal here, doesn't name some outsider in her divorce suit, but fastens upon the wife of the man who is the most popular member of the place. Every chauffeur and every maidservant is talking about it;

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the local papers of every other town within miles will gloat over it. We're not in sympathy with her; that's the truth. We think she ought to have been more careful of our feelings and our reputation, even if Margaret Meredith has broken up her home."

"It seems to me," said Gilbert, "that Mrs. Osborn is required by you all to be something less than human—or more; which is it? I don't know her, but if I did, I think I would ask her to give me a cup of tea. Have they any children?"

"No," said Nina. "Perhaps that's why she has lost her head."

Another car passed, and in it was seated a woman whose face Gilbert saw for a brief moment,—a beautiful, brave face, very pale beneath a small black hat.

"Daisy Osborn!" cried Nina excitedly.

"I rather thought so," said Gilbert. "I wouldn't be a bit surprised if we found her holding Bob's hand too."

"Impossible. Having been on the other side, your imagination is almost French."

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Gilbert laughed. "Well, I'm betting," he said.

There were half a dozen cars parked in the driveway of the Meredith house, and among them was that of Mrs. Osborn. Nina Hopper's quick eyes picked it out at once. "I'm glad I didn't take you," she said, and she wheeled around and gave the astonishing news to Marjorie, Doris and Susan. Naturally rather pleased with his judgment of character, Gilbert stood aside while the young matrons gathered together and indulged in an orgy of whispers. He caught the beginnings and the ends of several hurried sentences. "Think of it! How can she?" "We haven't spoken to her for days." "What will Bob say?" "It's very uncomfortable. I don't think I shall go in." Then there was a pause.

It was Mrs. Holbrook who broke the irresolution. "We've probably been seen from the house," she said. "We can't very well go back now. Look, there's Bob waving to us. Come along. We must face it. I never imagined that Daisy Osborn had such nerve."

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Pulling herself together and hiding her excitement beneath a well-simulated expression of nonchalance, Gilbert's sister led the way, her Colony spirit dominating her. The others, like geese on a village green, followed. It was a moment which put a distinct thrill in the lives of them all, — except that of Gilbert, who had been surfeited with the sort of thrills which are accompanied with the roar of whiz-bangs and the screech of Big Berthas.

CHAPTER II

THE Meredith house had been designed by a young and unknown architect. It was, therefore, something in the nature of an experiment, and unconventional in its lines. Long and low and white, with green jalousies, huge chimneys and a roof line broken by many peaks, it wore a most comfortable and homely appearance, standing high up, bathed in sunlight. Rock gardens surrounded it, and everywhere as you approached it from the road there were groups of silver birches, slim and virginal, poplars straight and pointed, and willows weeping alone. Fat bushes of rhododendrons were jotted here and there on lawns as smooth-shaven as an actor's face after three o'clock. No one with a healthy mind would have imagined that under the roof of such a house there could be anything but peace and love, laughter

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and happiness, the merry voices of young children and the music of contentment.

Built as a present to his bride, every shingle had been placed upon it under the inspection of the man who had looked confidently forward to a life of blessedness within its walls and who had determined to make it the epitome of all that was best in him. There were no frowning doorways and shadowy places. Like its owner, the house was bold and clean and forthright and very cheerful. The trees all about it gave it an appearance of youth and newness,—of a beginning begun well, to go on well. What a pity that already the shadow of disillusion hung over it. How sad to think that very soon it might fall into the hands of strangers.

“Bad luck,” thought Gilbert, as all these things came to him on his way up the very perfect drive.

Bob Meredith came to meet them. His breeziness was obviously false, and his affectation of high spirits as transparent as tissue paper. He turned to Gilbert, after a light welcome to each of the girls. “Hello, Carlton!”

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he sang out. "Thought you were playing golf. Come and try one of my cocktails—almost the last you will get before Chadband lays his hands on my cellars." He took Marjorie Holbrook's arm with an even greater effort of cheerfulness. "Come on in," he said, "and play hostess for me. There's quite a crowd here."

There was. The veranda gleamed with white frocks and was alive with the clatter of tongues.

Anna Hicks was there in a new hat which had been inspected, criticized and passed upon by every one. Its price had met with general approval. Olive Rumsey, still self-conscious after the recent plucking of her eyebrows which made them permanently surprised, was sitting on the top step. Almost ruined by the movies, which had become a habit, she was quite certain that her attitude was Pickfordian and her expression that of Marguerite Clark. There also was Mrs. John Putnam Mundy, universally known as Frankie because her name was Frances and her remarks astoundingly honest

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and straight to the point. Every one knew that her hair had gone white long before it had a right to do so, because she had seen the man she loved pinned beneath a motor-car and in one short, appalling moment put from laughter into everlasting silence. It was she who, swallowing surprise, had held out the hand of friendship to Daisy Osborn, thus making it impossible for any one on that veranda to look at her askance or to treat her with anything but the most friendly spirit.

To the newcomers Frankie gave an immediate hint in her best style. "Quaker Hill rallies around Bob Meredith," she said, "and here's Daisy showing us all what true courage means."

It filled Gilbert with quiet amusement to see the way in which his sister and her friends greeted the woman whose nerve had filled them with a desire to coin new words. Nina kissed her; and Susan, not quite such a whole-hogger, gave her a very cordial "Hello, Daisy — how nice to see you!" And it was while the first round of tea and cocktails was being discussed

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that Bob Meredith, with his heart in an agony of pain and his life trembling on the verge of chaos, went across to the woman whose action had plunged him into trouble. "It's good of you to come, Daisy," he said.

"I knew you'd understand," she answered.

And they smiled bravely into each other's eyes, — the one who was to lose a wife and the other a husband; and then, each recognizing the horror of the situation, they drifted among the little crowd which was doing its utmost to be merry and bright and to put as much eye-wash as they could manufacture over the crisis which affected them all. The Colony spirit has much in its favor. It makes even women charitable toward each other, — and what greater thing can be achieved than that?

Marjorie Holbrook was in the middle of a most amusing criticism of "Tiger, Tiger", to which she hung a pathetic dissertation in regard to cooks, when a maid, whose eyes were red with weeping, came out and said that Meredith was wanted on the 'phone. For a moment silence fell, and all eyes watched Meredith as

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he turned and went into the house with a kind of lurch. Over the wire which puts men in communication with the outer world, however isolated they may be, might now come the verdict of the case of Osborn vs. Osborn and Meredith. It was Frankie who restarted the conversation and kept it going until Meredith came back with his eyes flickering and a curious touch of color on his high cheekbones.

“Margaret is coming down with Julian,” he said. “I don’t know what’s — what’s happened.”

He went across to Daisy Osborn and laid his hand very gently on her shoulder. His silence was eloquent of sympathy and fellow-suffering, and the glance that she gave him stabbed the hearts of all the other women. It was an extraordinary moment, electrical in its drama, — one which sent every imagination flying off at a tangent. Margaret was coming down with Julian! Did that mean that the case had been dismissed, or had Margaret been proved guilty, and was Julian bringing her home to discuss a rearrangement which would

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mean the breaking up of two homes? Who could say? One fact stood out quite clearly. The call had come from New York, which meant that an hour and a half must be filled somehow before the car made its appearance. A long time with every nerve on edge.

Whatever the others intended to do made little difference to Frankie. Glancing at her wrist watch, she made up her mind to sit on the Meredith veranda just precisely until she could metaphorically see the car rounding the hill two miles away. She then intended to rise and go forth, followed by the procession of charming girls who would not dare remain behind, however urgent their curiosity. A born leader, Frankie, — with the white hair and the young face and the empty heart.

No one would have imagined that a single cloud hung over that very cheerful house. Even Meredith joined in the general vivacity and badinage, and Daisy Osborn said more witty things to the square inch than ever before in her life. Away below in the garden, Bob Junior, a splendid little fellow in a white duck

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sailor suit, was playing at Indians with several other children, and his laughter floated on the air like rose petals. Poor little lad! Little he knew of the anguish that the sound of his voice brought to the man sitting on the sunny side of his house among those white-clad, laughing women who were perched on the veranda like fan-tailed pigeons.

To Gilbert Carlton, who watched all this with a sympathy which was made all the more keen and human from recent experiences, that hour was one he would never forget. Before the war he had been in the habit of making somewhat ribald jokes about the Colony spirit, which seemed to him to stand for an utter lack of privacy and the impossibility of maintaining the necessary fourth wall which he considered to be the whole point in the running of a home. But as he watched the manner in which these young wives and still younger unmarried girls played up in order to divert the minds of Meredith and Daisy Osborn from the tragedy in which they were in a sort of way partners, he regretted his sarcasm.

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Exactly to the moment Frankie rose, her mental calculation amazingly accurate. The car in which sat Julian and Margaret was at the foot of the hill two miles away. "Well," she said, "I must be going, or my cook will be playing 'Tiger, Tiger' with the gentleman from Cork who does me the honor to look after my vegetables and cast a friendly eye over my rose garden."

There was a general and irresistible movement, a burst of cheery "So long's!" the disappearance of the various automobiles, and the fading gleams of white frocks among the silver birches.

CHAPTER III

DAISY OSBORN alone stood to her guns, and there was a strange silence. "Bob," she said presently, no longer with any attempt to hide her feelings, "what do you think has happened?"

There was a deep sigh and a momentary shrug of the shoulders. "God knows," said Meredith. "They were found at that Baltimore hotel by your detectives. We can't get over that."

She got up and stood in front of him. "Do you blame me for what I did?"

"No, my dear."

"If there had been children, if there had been a little boy like Bob —"

Meredith shook his head. "Even then you would have been justified, I'm afraid. I wish, oh, how I wish I had been good enough to hold

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Margaret's love! It's all my fault. I must have been too anxious to make money for her. I forgot that she needed more of me than my business did. Coming home dog-tired every night made me a pretty rotten sort of companion. I see that now. Less money and more love — why don't they tell us that, these people who marry us when we're young?"

Daisy put her hand up to her heart, and a little string of tears made a procession down her cheeks. "But Julian!" she said. "Julian! I loved him and did my best. It's very hard luck. Bob, I swear to you on my soul that if I had dreamt for a moment that Margaret was the woman, I would have done nothing. I would have let him off. Do you believe me?"

"Yes, my dear," he said. "Life's a very curious business, and I suppose we're given those shocks just to find out how much grit we've got. The thing is n't over yet. What are we going to do, you and I? You divorce Julian and begin again somehow or other; but Margaret is still my wife. Am I to set her free for Julian? Is that the thing to do?"

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Daisy nodded. "What else?" she said. "Let them be happy, at any rate. There's no reason why all four of us should go crippled."

Meredith bent forward and clenched his fists.

"Look!" said Daisy Osborn. "They're here."

Meredith looked, and what he saw gave him some comfort. With his hat well down over his eyes and his usually laughing mouth set tight, Julian was driving; and Margaret, strangely pale, was seated upright in the back of the car with her hands clasped together. There was no triumph in this return.

Bob tried to steady his voice. "Shall we meet them?" he asked.

"No," said Daisy, "I can't."

And so those two, who according to evidence had wandered together from the straight path, were ungreeted and received in silence.

With a quick, surprised glance at the woman whom he had not seen for several weeks, Julian Osborn got out, gave his hand to Margaret, and followed her up the steps of the veranda. Under his small mustache his lips wore

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an odd smile. He waited for Margaret to speak and stood, immaculate as usual, with the evening sun on his bared head.

Looking tired and curiously unemotional, and rather as though she had come from a shopping expedition, Margaret nodded to Daisy and turned to her husband. "How nice the place looks this evening!" she said. "I hope Bob has had his glass of milk." She looked down at the small, joyous boy away in the distance wistfully, through a mist of sudden tears.

Meredith pushed a chair forward. "Will you have tea or something?" he asked. "Cocktail, Julian?"

But the question remained unanswered.

Julian looked from the drawn face of his friend to that of the fair sweet girl who had loved and married him. Still with that odd smile on his lips, he spoke with the sort of jauntiness that a man self-consciously adopts when he has done something to wreck the faith of those who trust him. "We have a little surprise for you both," he said. "The woman they found me with was n't Margaret."

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And he paused, like a comedian in expectation of a laugh, or a stump orator of a round of applause; and still there was nothing to help him. The statement was so diametrically opposite to the one those two had keyed themselves up to bear that for a moment it left them disbelieving.

Whereupon, under the strain of this peculiar silence, Julian's self-consciousness changed to irritation. "Don't you get me? I tell you that Margaret was not the woman who was with me at Baltimore. She proved an alibi, and the referee has sent her back to Quaker Hill without a stain on her character. There was a woman," he added, with a mixture of defiance and shame, "but Margaret comes to you clothed in chastity."

With one swift glance at his friend's wife he turned away and stood with his right shoulder against one of the pillars; no longer was that odd smile on his white lips.

It was then that Bob Meredith held his hands out and groped his way toward Margaret, like a blind man. And when he reached her a cry

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burst from him, and he wrapped his arms about her and put his face down upon her shoulder.

After what was to Julian the longest moment in his life, and the most acutely painful, he felt a little touch on his arm.

"Come away," said Daisy. "There are things I must know too."

It was n't until their footsteps could be heard no longer that Meredith attempted to speak. What he said, with his voice broken, made Margaret wince.

"Oh, my dear, forgive me! I had bad thoughts about you. What can I ever do to make up for it? It would have been my fault if you had done this thing. I left you too much alone and unamused. I wanted to make as much money for you as Hopper makes for Nina, and it left me tired. I've been all the way through hell, and if you'll give me a chance, I'll make a new beginning. I doubted you, and I'm ashamed. Have n't you anything to say to me?"

Margaret looked up at him with a sort of

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amazement. She knew all his qualities, no one better, but such generosity as this overwhelmed her. In her mind's eye she saw Julian following Daisy home like a naughty, spoiled boy,—the charming, gay, careless, self-indulgent, too-good-looking Julian, who was all out for fun. But here before her, humble and faithful and earnest and hard working, with no one in his heart except herself, was Bob. Something that was very young and foolish broke within her and gave way. “Oh, Bob!” she said. “Oh, my dear Bob!” And she stood on tiptoe and kissed him.

It was with very red eyes that presently, arm in arm, these two went down into the garden and brought the laughing boy up to bed,—the boy who wondered why Mummy's hot tears dropped upon his face when she heard his prayers again.

Both of them had things to do after dinner. There were papers for Bob to examine in his den, and for Margaret there were many things to catch up with domestically. She had been

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living in town with her sister while under the shadow of the case, and of course the linen cupboard was in a state of chaos and the boy's clothes all out of order. With cold hands Margaret busied herself about the house. She could hear Bob singing in his room, and the load on her conscience was very heavy. "O God," she said many times, "why did I do it? Why did I do it?"

It was with the intention of bracing herself up that presently Margaret went downstairs and out on to the moon-bathed veranda to pace up and down and think. The light from Bob's room made a white patch on the lawn under the shadow of the house. From time to time she heard him knock out his pipe, — the old familiar sound.

Suddenly, having avoided the road and come over the soft lawn with the swiftness of an Indian, Julian stood at her elbow.

"What do you want?" she asked, drawing away.

He bent forward, breathing hard, with his handsome face all alight and eager, and the ob-

session of a new idea sweeping all caution and contrition before it. "You — you!" he said. "We were fools to suppose we could deceive ourselves as we've deceived Bob and Daisy. It can't be done. Your sister knows. She swore that black was white to get you out of this. But what's the good? You love me, and I love you, and suppose she gives us away? She might — you never can tell. People become conscience-stricken, you know. So don't let's run the chance. Let's bolt together now and be honest."

Margaret held out her cold hands to ward him off. "Bob's too good," she said, "and there's the boy and this house. It's over, Julian. I wish it had never begun. All the rest of my life, every day, every hour, I shall work and pray and strive to earn forgiveness and make myself worthy again of that man upstairs."

Julian caught hold of her angrily, with the passion of a man who sees his magnetism failing. "I can't go through with it," he said. "It's impossible. I'm crazy about you. You

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must come. You're lying when you say you don't love me."

"Yes," she said, "I am lying; but before very long I shall make it the truth. There's Bob and my boy. Go away. Please go away."

Julian peered into her face, saw something that made him realize that he was not on the same spiritual level as the girl who had momentarily lost her balance, and fell back with a mixture of despair and respect. He stammered a few incoherent words, picked up her hand and kissed it, turned and left her.

She watched him disappear across the lawn and through the silver birches and out into the road.

Bob called her; but before going in, Margaret clasped her hands and looked up at the clear, star-bespattered sky. "Dear God," she whispered, "help me, help me!"

CHAPTER IV

WITHIN sound of the gusts of laughter and the constant rattle of voices that came from the house in which was being celebrated the triumph of Margaret Meredith, Daisy Osborn dined alone.

A girl of twenty-two, to whom everything had come easy and who had only just begun to realize that life is not like a very smart car which can be refilled with gasoline at a moment's notice and, if slightly out of order, made as efficient as ever again by any quantity of experts for a mere handful of money, Daisy Osborn felt that she was standing on the lip of an abyss and was startled, disconcerted and almost inclined to disbelief.

Her beauty and high spirits, her knack of saying witty things on the spur of the moment,

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and her limitless fund of vitality had made her the center of the group of young people among which she had been brought up. She had not been the spoiled ewe lamb of her family, because, luckily for her, her three brothers had kept her pretty well in order, pulling her hair when she became cocky and putting her in her place when she endeavored to give orders. She was, therefore, imbued with the spirit of sportsmanship which only the possession of brothers gives a girl. The magnet of her beauty had drawn to her side all sorts and conditions of boys from the moment when she had been able to wield a tennis racquet with sufficient strength to make her service worth taking. At eighteen she could have had her pick of all the most eligible members of the younger set within fifty miles of her father's house. She had flirted with the same light-heartedness and high spirits with which she had done every other blessed thing that there was to do; all her days had run on oiled wheels, and there had never been a cloud in her sky. And then Julian Osborn had come along with his small

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mustache and Irish eyes, constant laugh and the dangerous gift of looking at a girl as though she alone lived in the world.

Too impetuous for caution and too young to be able to steady herself with arguments against giving her heart to a man whose good looks made him the target of all feminine eyes, she immediately succumbed and within a month of their first meeting was married. There was something medieval in this love of hers, something fairy-book-like and almost tragic. Julian was to her the gallant, splendid, golden-souled person of whom she had read as a child in the immortal stories in which men and women have no dross and walk unscathed through trouble and tribulations, forever faithful. And this love, the first big real thing in her life, altered her point of view and turned her from a bright, ubiquitous, merry, thoughtless creature into a little woman dominated by the home feeling and inspired with a deep-seated desire to live up to the exaltation of wifehood.

Her first year of marriage had been a short and beautiful dream. There had been no

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single fly in the amber of her happiness and joy. But during the second year Julian's ardor had gradually cooled; he was away from home for unexplained periods, and people began to talk. Innuendoes and anonymous letters began to gather, and presently pride stepped in; and on her demand for an explanation Daisy received an outburst of angry words and a statement from Julian that he might be found at his club. Finally her people came into the matter and advised the unhappy little wife to have her husband watched, with the result which brought about the divorce proceedings.

But even now, disillusioned as she was, Daisy stood among the debris of her dreams with a fine and splendid courage, thankful for one thing, — that her friend Margaret Meredith was not the woman in the case. Still nothing much more than a child, she sat broken and alone in her house of first love, a sort of widow, not able to realize where the legal process had left her.

She had asked Julian to come back with her to the house and talk things over. He had fol-

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lowed her as far as the door and then without a word had turned away and disappeared into the dusk. Where was he, and what was he doing? Knowing nothing about the intricate divorce laws which are different in every State and are a puzzle even to lawyers, she supposed that as Margaret had been proved not guilty, her case had failed. Bob Meredith and Margaret would go on again as before. Why should n't she and Julian do the same?

She was still sitting in lonely state at the dining table at which Julian's place was empty when Mrs. Mundy sailed in, radiant in a dress which sparkled with sequins. Women with white hair always sparkle with sequins. In life as well as on the stage these things go together. The laughter and the high voices of the celebrants from the house near by still drifted ironically in. Gilbert Carlton, Mrs. Holbrook, Nina Hopper, Doris Clayton, the Petersons, Elsa Mahon, and the leading spirits of the Quaker Hill Colony were all there. In their boisterous joy at the happy reunion of Bob and Maggie Meredith they seemed to have

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little thought of the tragedy which had stalked into the house of Julian and Daisy Osborn.

Frankie Mundy, whose own life had been very terribly wounded, was touched at the sight of this girl so young and lonely and white, and she bent over her and kissed the small fair head.

"I've slipped away for a few minutes," she said. "I had a picture of you sitting like this. I could n't bear it. If only those people would make less noise. Come into the drawing-room, my dear, and let's talk things over quietly."

"Where's Julian?" asked Daisy. It was her only thought.

"No one has seen him. And, anyway, he has no right here now."

"No right here? Why not?"

"You've divorced him. This is no longer his house."

Frankie led the bewildered and trembling girl into the drawing-room out of range of the servants' listening ears, and the two sat down knee to knee in a room lighted only by the moon and filled with the scent of lilac. It was very plain to Frankie that her little friend did n't

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know what the law had done for her. *She* knew, because Wilbur Hicks, the lawyer who had represented Margaret, was one of the diners whose laughter rang out so frequently. From him she had gathered the exact position of affairs.

"Can you bear the truth?" she asked.

Daisy hesitated, clasped and unclasped her hands, and then, with a deep breath, nodded.

"Listen then. There *was* a woman at Baltimore. She attended before the referee and swore that it was she who was caught by your detectives. It appears that she registered as M. Meredith, and she explained that she called herself by that name because she had taken it for the movies. Her dress case had the letters 'M. M.' on it, and the tag bore the name 'Meredith, Quaker Hill.' She stays here sometimes, she said. The detectives were justified in believing that she was Margaret. Who she is I don't know, and Mr. Hicks tells me it does n't matter. Probably she was asked by the referee for her real name, but it won't come out, and it appears to be nobody's busi-

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ness. It was sufficient that she and Julian both swore to the fact, and that enabled you to get your divorce. I got out of Mr. Hicks that Margaret was with her sister at the opera that night and that she stayed in New York with her in East 62nd Street. It seems to me that none of us is going to be safe if these movie actresses are permitted to take any name they like. And now, my dear, it comes to this. You are free from Julian, or will be as soon as the court ratifies the verdict of the referee,—only a matter of a short time. If you'll take my advice, and I give it to you as a woman who has suffered and who knows what it is to stand alone in the world, you will, if you still love Julian, exercise the quality of mercy."

Daisy bent forward eagerly. "Tell me how. Oh, tell me how. I shall always love Julian."

"Yes, I have thought of you as a one-love woman, a little sister of mine. Well, let the law take its course, as it must do, now that you have set it in motion. In the meantime go quietly away somewhere and write a long letter

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to Julian in which you say that love is too good and rare a thing to fling aside, even when it has been sadly and deplorably hurt. Explain to him that you are not going to take up the position of a hard and bitter woman, offer him forgiveness, and ask him to fix a date for another marriage. Julian is fundamentally decent and honorable. He has been badly spoiled and women have flung themselves at his feet. We don't know, and perhaps never shall, what sort of temptation he was up against, but I am sure that he has learned his lesson and will never do this thing again. He will come back contrite and very eager to turn over a new leaf, and you will be able to begin again with him."

For a moment Daisy sat in front of the woman who knew life, feeling that she was the smallest and the most helpless thing in the world. It seemed to her that she had been suddenly disconnected from the onward march and was stranded on the edge of one of its tunnels like an empty car of a train. Then she bent forward and peered into Frankie's sympathetic eyes. "How gladly I will do what you say,"

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she said. "But there's Julian. What will he do? Will it matter to him if I forgive him or not? Have n't I lost him altogether?"

But Frankie knew men. Faithful to the one whom she had lost, she had been an observer. She had stood aloof and watched. She was of opinion that Julian had merely suffered one of those strange aberrations which almost against their will twist men out of the straight path. Julian was young and egotistical and for both those reasons open to flattery. She believed that his home and his wife, both so charming, meant far more to him now that he had lost them than ever before, and that, with proper treatment, he would rejoice at being asked to return to them both to kiss again with tears. And she told all these things, sagely and with great tenderness, to the big-eyed girl who hung upon her words. What better thing in life could she do than bring these two together again? What mattered the stiff-necked attitude, so unimaginative, so hard and conventional, so un-Christ like, of this young girl's people? "The quality of mercy is not

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strained,'” she said, “‘It droppeth like the gentle dew from heaven,’ and of all good things charity is the greatest. And now, my dear, I must go back to my party. I think that Julian is somewhere near and that you will see him before the moon grows dim to-night. If I know anything about that boy of yours, he’s wandering like an uneasy spirit, very ready to humble himself to you but a little afraid of what you will say. After I’ve gone go out into your garden and send a silent S. O. S. into the air. I’ll be bound that he’ll pick it up and come to you. If so, it will be better for you to have a heart-to-heart immediately and scratch that idea of writing a letter that I suggested to you before. Good night and good luck.”

CHAPTER V

BUT before Daisy could slip out of the drawing-room on to the lawn which under the strong moonlight looked as though it had been covered with a thin layer of snow, a short, stout and rather aggressive figure was silhouetted against the sky in the frame of the open French window, and there was an excited whisper. "Are you there, Daisy?" Mrs. Wilbur Hicks, the wife of the lawyer, had also escaped from the celebration.

Daisy switched on the lights. Her instinct warned her that this woman, a well-known mischief-maker, had come like a bird of ill omen and must be seen clear-cut and not in the mystery of moonlight.

With hair which art had endeavored unsuccessfully to make a brilliant gold and a face

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which constant massage had not been able to render devoid of sinister lines, Mrs. Hicks came into the middle of the drawing-room with a little stumble of excitement.

“I waited for Frankie to go,” she said. “Of course I don’t know what she came to say but she’s a sentimentalist and I guess she advised you to do the Christian thing and turn the other cheek and all that. Well, I’m a Christian but I’m not a pacifist, and knowing what I do I simply can’t stand by and see you made to look ridiculous, — I simply can’t.”

The fact that she immediately began by stating that she did n’t know what Frankie had said made it absolutely certain to Daisy that she had posted herself somewhere on the veranda and heard everything. She was of the type of woman who eavesdropped without the smallest compunction and insisted upon having a finger in everybody’s pie, whether they liked or not.

“But I’m not being made to look ridiculous,” said Daisy, with more than a touch of resentment and impatience, and with a fervent

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wish that she possessed sufficient poise and moral courage to tell this woman to mind her own business.

“ Oh! That ’s where you make a mistake, my dear. Even if I get into trouble by coming here, even if I am hauled over the coals for letting the cat out of the bag, I have got to put you wise to what has been done, because I detest crookedness and deceit.”

Mrs. Hicks spoke with her usual endeavor to be impressive and dramatic. She was a great theater-goer, and she brought back into her daily life the mannerisms of those actresses who are condemned to emotional parts and who, in strong moments of utterly false sentiment, clutch the backs of chairs and totter from place to place with the palm of a hot hand pressed against their foreheads. It may be said that Hicks found that his business kept him almost wholly in the city.

“ Why must you tell me? ” asked Daisy.

Mrs. Hicks was slightly disconcerted for a moment. “ My dear,” she said, “ are n’t I one of your best friends? Whatever the others

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are, I am loyal and shall stick to you. Heaven knows you've got enough to put up with without being made the victim of what Gilbert Carlton calls a 'spoof'!"

Daisy made for the window. She knew from many experiences that when Mrs. Hicks was most loyal to her friends roofs fell in and faiths fell in pieces.

But Mrs. Hicks was too quick for her. She barred the way, — square and solid, the sham gold of her hair glittering like the top of a barber's pole. "What I have to tell you," she said, "will put a new light on this case and enable you to reform your life with some dignity and with the right point of view as to Julian and that Meredith woman, — whom I never could stand."

Daisy's blood rose in anger. There was something intolerable about this intrusion at a moment when her heart was bruised and full of a desire to reconstruct, to do the generous thing and reestablish the love that was the greatest thing in her life. It seemed to her that the Colony spirit could be carried a little

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too far sometimes. "Mrs. Hicks," she said bravely, "I am sure that you'll be missed by the celebration party. Please don't let me keep you."

But Mrs. Hicks was not a sensitive person. She was, indeed, as pachydermatous as an elephant and not to be deprived of the intense enjoyment of standing in the limelight.

The shadow of a man, unnoticed by Daisy, lay suddenly across the veranda, and remained there, arrested. A lilting fox trot, played on the piano in the house of celebration, cut the quietude of the evening. From somewhere near by a dog started to howl at the moon.

"Daisy Osborn," said Mrs. Hicks impressively, not quite certain if she had Miss Rambeau or Madame Kalich in mind, "I know something. Quite by accident I have picked up information for you which, as a good and virtuous woman, it is my duty to give you. I was talking to my husband about your case just before dinner, and I could read between the lines of what he said that he had worked the alibi by which Margaret Meredith got off and

brought the other woman into the case by a very clever piece of legal jugglery. All that business about this mysterious person taking the name of Meredith in moving pictures is fake, my dear, pure fake. I know it's a very dangerous thing to say so, my husband being the lawyer in the case and all, but I'm thinking about you and your future, and to tell you the truth I can't bear to see that conceited woman, Margaret Meredith, who has always given herself such frills, coming out of this 'clothed in chastity' as I hear that Julian said. What's the world coming to, I should like to know, if a woman can take away one's husband, smash up one's home, and get off scot free by a neat arrangement of lies."

The shadow moved. With his face white with rage, Julian stalked into the room. "I don't know whether you know it," he said, with the peculiar drawl that he put on when he was possessed with a desire to hit, "but your voice has extraordinary carrying power, Mrs. Hicks. I congratulate you upon your gift of dissecting what you call a neat arrangement of

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lies. It must have been directly inherited by you from Ananias."

Mrs. Hicks wheeled around. The rouge on her cheeks stood out grotesquely against a very pale skin. "How dare you say such a thing?" she spluttered.

But Julian interrupted what was only the beginning of a Niagara of words by leaning forward and tapping the uncomfortable woman on the arm. "What you have just told Daisy, and I heard it as I came across the lawn, would be quite enough to disbar your husband, if there were one word of truth in it. At the moment this is not my house, but if it were, I don't think I should be able to restrain myself from taking you up and dropping you, sturdy as you are, in the middle of the rock garden."

He went over to the window, made a gesture which for its complete descriptiveness would have done justice to the French Academy of Acting and waited, glaring, for Mrs. Hicks to take herself off.

And this, with a little snort in which there was fright as well as triumph, she did.

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The rap of her high heels across the veranda was followed by one of those queer silences which, when they occur in domestic life, mean that the crossroads have been arrived at, and if perfect honesty and much forbearance and mutual sympathy is not exercised, a crash is bound to follow. Not once, not for one single instant, had Daisy taken her eyes from Julian's face from the moment that he had broken into Mrs. Hicks' torrent of mischief. Behind his anger and indignation she had an uneasy feeling that there was more than a touch of fright and the determination to get rid of Mrs. Hicks before she could go into further details. Her first joy at seeing Julian was not affected immediately by the sting which this story of Mrs. Hicks left behind it.

It began to die at the sight of her husband's face and because, when left alone with her and he caught her steady gaze, his eyes fell and his hand went out to fidget weakly with the nearest thing on the table. She was ready to forgive the fact that the man she loved had not been true. She was very young, and her mind

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was stored with memories of great happiness, and the quality of mercy was strong in her heart. It was not the poison which Mrs. Hicks had deliberately dropped that stirred her suspicion. It was something all about Julian himself, — a shiftiness and an inability to face her. Her pride, her vanity and her sense of justice rebelled against taking him back with the shadow of dishonesty hanging over him. The exultation which had been stirred in her by Mrs. Mundy turned suddenly into a great and bitter resentment, because her instinct, which she could not smother, told her that Julian, even Julian, was taking advantage of her youth and credulity to deceive her and use her to protect Margaret Meredith. This was altogether more than she could stand.

As for Julian, standing there well aware of the fact that he was cutting a very poor figure, he began, during this curious pause, to use inward language about Mrs. Hicks that was utterly unfit for publication. He had come back after many hours of loneliness and deep

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thought a very different man from the one who had brought Margaret home. He had made up his mind to speak to Daisy humbly and to throw himself upon her mercy as Margaret had advised him to do. He recognized that he had played the game not as a sportsman but as a skunk, and he was sorry. He saw that after all the best place in all the world was home, and Margaret's example had stirred in him a burning and overwhelming desire to patch things up, begin again and leave the secret of the alibi, which the law had accepted, forever untouched. As much for Daisy's sake as for Margaret's this horrible secret must be preserved. What frightful bad luck that this Hicks woman had forced herself into things like a cheap emissary of unrelenting fate. He was ready to pay his bill with all the interest which Daisy thought fit to add to it, but he prayed that she would not go off at a perfectly human tangent and include Margaret in her desire to punish. There were Bob and the boy.

Finally it was Daisy who broke the silence. Her voice was icy, and for all her youth there

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was an amazing dignity in her attitude. "Did you hear everything that Mrs. Hicks said?"

"Nearly everything," said Julian.

"Perhaps that was lucky."

"Why?"

"It will help you in what you have to say to me."

Julian looked up, but his finger left a damp mark upon the shiny table. "I don't understand what you mean by that," he said.

"Don't you? Think it over then." But Daisy was unable to maintain this unnatural iciness. She loved this man and her life was in the hollow of his hand. "I don't know what you have come to say," she cried, "but whatever it is, let it be the truth. I can forgive unfaithfulness but not lies and deceit."

Julian pulled himself together. He was in a very morass of lies and deceit, and the worst of it was that for the sake of both these women his feet were stuck into it. "There's only one way out of this, Daisy," he said. "Ask no questions. Let me begin all over again, and if you can, wash out everything that has gone

before. You're big enough to do that, and I'll see that you never regret it."

"There's one question that I must ask. Have you seen Margaret?"

It was the very question which Julian would rather she had not asked. He hedged.

"What makes you think that I've seen Margaret?" he asked, and thereby made a fatal mistake.

Daisy's suspicions ripened under this weak attempt to dodge. "You have seen Margaret. You have, I know it. Don't lie to me. I can see it all over you."

"Yes, I have, — but I don't see that you can get anything out of that."

"I don't want to get anything out of that. I want to believe in you as I used to do. I want to dismiss this story that Mrs. Hicks has told as something beneath contempt. But why should you go to Margaret before coming to me? It was n't fair and it hurts. It puts ugly things into my mind. I've been waiting for you hour after hour. I've been listening for you to come frankly to me here and then to tell

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you that I 'll forgive everything and take you back because I love you so. But you went to Margaret first and it was n't fair. You left me here eating my heart out, and by going to Margaret you force me to believe that there is some truth in this hideous story that Mrs. Hicks has dropped like poison into my mind."

Julian made no answer. He was not a liar. He was not a master of specious prevarication. He knew that he was cornered, and in the grim figure of punishment which he could see marching towards him the security of Margaret trembled in the balance.

"Oh, Julian, why don't you say something? Why don't you put me out of my misery?"

The girl's cry cut deeply, but still he had nothing to say. The triumph of his return was a sorry thing.

And then, under a strong revulsion of feeling, all that was most human in Daisy came to the surface and turned her into a little figure of anger and indignation. "If you think that I 'm going to play the part of the humble domestic mouse while you and Margaret arrange

things to please yourselves you're wrong. There's one thing that I'll not be made to look and that's a fool. This is a question of pride, not of heart, and by going to Margaret before you came to me you've made me see the whole story in its true light. There is only one thing I can do now, — take the case back to court and get even with Margaret. She shall pay for this deceit to the very last inch, and Mrs. Hicks shall be my witness."

In his mind's eye Julian could see Bob Meredith waiting up in his den for the woman who did not love him but who was going to sacrifice her happiness for the sake of her child and her home. "For God's sake," he said, "go steady."

Once more the girl's young voice rang out. "Be honest with me then," she cried.

And as Julian looked at her standing in front of him in all her loveliness, but with her charity and her goodness of heart blurred by her desire for revenge, he decided to take a chance. Honesty was her fetish, and if he catered to that fully and completely he might yet save the

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position even if his own happiness were jeopardized.

"This is the truth," he said. "You shall have it all. — The woman I was caught with at Baltimore *was* Margaret. The story about the other woman was cooked up for Bob's sake, but just now, simply because I could n't stand this network of lies and deceit that you hate as much as I do, I went to Bob's house and saw Margaret. I asked her to chuck everything and clear out with me, — and she would n't. She is going to dedicate the rest of her life to Bob and to the boy, and she told me to go back to you and ask you to forgive me and to tell you that I am ready and willing to play the game; and I've come back and there is n't anything I won't do to try and heal the wound that I've given you, — not anything, Daisy, as God's my judge."

But with a look on her face which Julian had never seen before, Daisy went swiftly to the window. "You can come with me or not," she said, "just as you like. I'm going to Margaret. I'm going to let Bob Meredith

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see that you and she have made a fool of me. I can stand everything but that."

"Oh no," he said, "don't." And he went over to her and caught hold of her arms and held her tight. "Hit me as hard as you like but let Margaret off. She wants to play the game, I tell you, and there's Bob and that boy. Give her a chance."

But Daisy tore herself away. "Why should she have a chance? There's my life, my pride and my dignity, and you and she have made me look a fool. Margaret must suffer as much as I'm suffering, and all four of us must get out of this mass of deceit and be broken together."

She went out into the moonlight, angry, outraged and with a metaphorical whip in her hand with which she was determined to leave on Margaret's soft body a red and glaring welt. Clothed in chastity,—it was ironical. Revenge was justified.

But the picture of Margaret's face as he had last seen it was stamped upon Julian's brain. She was a good girl who had been tempted by

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him from the straight path. She loved him and had given him up. At all costs he must save her. Once more, therefore, he placed himself in front of the girl who had it in her power to put the little house of Meredith in utter shambles. "Do you believe in God?" he asked.

It was an inspiration. Something was given to Julian at that instant which is not placed upon the lips of any man whose spirit has not at one time or another been in touch with the Divine Father. He was permitted to use this question, even he, scandalous as his behavior had been, because deep down in his heart there was the sincere desire to rise on stepping stones and to render himself worthy, very humbly and very earnestly, of the girl who had gone with him to the altar. Like Margaret he had learned his lesson and was eager to pay the price for a passionate interlude which had jeopardized the happiness of two other people.


Under this unexpected question Daisy bent like a little tree beneath a sudden wind. She had been for a moment almost almighty in her

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power of punishment, but the name of God stood for mercy in all its beauty, in all its charitableness, and she believed in Him. She saw herself, whip in hand, a figure of wrath, and she trembled and was ashamed. All the hardness went out of her face, all the blaze out of her eyes. She stood startled, wistfully trying to hear something in the beautiful quietude of the night which might come from the angels. Above her the roof of the world gleamed with little stars, and the quiet breathing of the flowers came up to her from the earth. Suddenly her heart melted and tears burst from her eyes and love drove revenge out of her sight, and she tottered forward and laid her head on Julian's chest.

And when, finally, this man who had been almost spoiled by his good looks could find his voice, it was to say, "Thank you, — thank you most awfully. I'm on my knees before you, Daisy. I love and respect you, and all my life shall be devoted to your happiness."

And away up in a little blue space another star came out.



CHAPTER VI

THERE's a house on Quaker Hill before which strangers draw up short and gasp. Either they like it so much that their search for enthusiastic words fails or they burst into fits of derisive laughter and twist into comic distortions. It takes their breath away. With the dead level of convention in their eyes it acts upon them as would eloquence and real emotion in the mouth of the average clergyman.

From a purely architectural point of view it is a very perfect specimen of type and period, and as such appeals to people of artistic understanding. To others it is just a nightmare of bricks and mortar, a building which might have been designed by Urban for the cover of *Vogue* or by Hugo Rumbold as the scene of an operatic setting for one of Grimm's fairy tales. Even these last, however, when they get used

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to it and recover from its erratic sky line and unconventional appearance, find that its subtle charm grows on them, and they never fail finally to leave it behind them without wishing to know something of the character and temperament of the man who lives in it.

It belongs, of course, to George O'Gorman Mahan, the man who was born in Cork and brought up in Brooklyn; the man who invented that world-famous little machine for beating up eggs, and with the money derived from its universal sale elaborated a hundred other small inventions for domestic purposes into a huge business and made a fortune. The proud and somewhat astonished manufacturer of things which were so obviously good that people asked themselves how they failed to think of them, he followed the usual course of business men year in year out, became the abject slave of his own capability, and permitted nothing to tempt him away from his desk until Nature put a cold finger upon his machinery and called a halt. Doctors pottered at his works, each one, of course, finding a different reason for his en-

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gine trouble, and for a time optimism went out of the sick man's heart and left him inert. Then the still, small voice of a long-forgotten ambition called and called, was finally understood, and up went Mahan to his room and packed a bag. The fetish of dollar hunting worked no longer. He must go forth and spend. And so, verging on forty-five, he went away for his first holiday to Europe, — and very nearly never returned. In a state of perpetual bewilderment, ecstasy, surprise, untranslatable satisfaction and naive amazement, he found that the world did not consist merely of downtown and uptown, of subway and restaurant, of office and bedroom. Startled and delighted, moved to tears and laughter, he made a voyage of discovery, and like a squirrel born in and suddenly set free from a whirling cage, found himself in places only the mere suggestion of which had touched him in his sleep. Open-mouthed he passed through picture galleries, stood bewitched beneath the misty roofs of old cathedrals, gazed enrapt at ancient cities from surrounding hills, sat intoxicated by

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great outbursts of orchestral music, and mingled humbly among vast crowds whose language and whose point of view were equally strange and to whom George O'Gorman Mahan, the utensil king, was less than the dust. Finally, budding with new ideas, bursting with new thoughts, stirred by new sap, quivering with a new emotion, he tore himself away, and coming back to old familiar haunts with health and gratitude, set out to find an architect with enough poetry in his soul to enable him to bring into existence a house of dreams. He had tasted of beauty and of music and of ancient things. In future he must have them in his daily life, to see, to touch and to own.

It was the O'Gorman part of this inventive genius and the royal blood which runs in the veins of nearly every Irishman which demanded all those turrets, towers and drawbridges that caught the eye, surprised the senses and intrigued the curiosity of passers-by. All the poetry and all that half-sad, half-humorous feeling for the fantastic and the grandiose which is indissolubly part of the Irish temper-

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ament had been exquisitely caught by the architect. Without any spirit of caricature, and keeping his tongue well out of his cheek, he had fulfilled every wish of George O'Gorman Mahan. He had brought into substantial existence the long-cherished desire which had been hidden in the heart of one who had not, after all, been so long and so intimately associated with domestic utensils as to have grown out of his national habit of letting his spirit soar among the kings and princes who will ever retain their places in the folklore of that tragi-comic island away across the seas. And so the house was a castle.

A man with gray hair, a boy's face, a shrewd, witty and persistent tongue, and the heart of a child we find Egg-Flip Mahan, as he was called, aged fifty-two, at that period of his life when he had just discovered the subtle fascination of golf and was in a position to ignore his office not only during the whole of Saturday but on Wednesday also.

He had been married twice. Kathleen, his first wife, the bright-eyed little Irish girl who

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had come over steerage on the same boat, had been his inspiration and helpmate from the age of nineteen. She had presented him not only with her golden optimism and indomitable courage, but with three particularly charming children, one of whom had died in infancy. Then, when just about to enjoy some of the fruits of her husband's success, she had faltered, made a momentary struggle to stay with her man and her children, and having received her call, joined the angels, of whom she was one, in her middle thirties. For several years the lonely and pathetic widower, hurt to the very quick, plunged even deeper into his work for the sake of the boy and girl who bore upon their faces the sweet reminders of his little colleen. With her memory still green in his heart, but unable to face life alone in a pompous New York apartment filled to bursting point with a weird collection of newly-made antiques, Mahan one day two years later met and was very quickly led to the altar by a handsome, definite and ambitious woman who was the widow of an American who had been in the consular serv-

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ice in Buenos Aires. It was she, dressed by Hickson, massaged by Lubelle, manicured by Zozime, and mentally influenced by Elbert Hubbard, who entered the serio-comic portals of O'Gorman castle, there to spend a rather polite and startled honeymoon and make the acquaintance of the young Mahans, — then sixteen and seventeen years old respectively.

She brought with her Elsa, a tiny, perfect person with the face of a doll and the body of a Dresden china figure, who not only spoke Spanish like a native but frequently, in a most disconcerting way, thought Spanishly. Clangs was her surname, but the sound of this word so jarred the poetic susceptibilities of her stepfather — who said that it reminded him of the methods of the American Express Company with personal baggage — that after some argument Elsa adopted the soft, musical, Irish name of her mother's new husband, — and it didn't suit her in the least. There was nothing Irish about Elsa. She was as practical as a razor, as logical as a limpid stream and as unimaginative as a swan.

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From the moment of his second marriage, Egg-Flip Mahan took on a new appearance. His rather wild curly hair was trimmed and oiled. He blushed out into clothes cut by the best New York tailor and developed a sudden passion for boots and ties. He startled his business friends by camouflaging his Cork brogue beneath a Bostonian accent, and he broadened and widened into a very charming host whose Gothic pile was the scene of many social entertainments. He identified himself with every movement for the betterment of Quaker Hill, was one of the governors of the country club and the president of the local bank. Also he was the proprietor of the Quaker Hill weekly paper into whose leading articles he frequently poured incoherent diatribes against England. He also wrote verses modeled on those of the melodious Moore about his beloved Emerald Isle which, by sending representatives to sit in Parliament and refuse everything that was offered in the way of Home Rule, had utterly prevented Great Britain from perfecting a home rule of her own. But

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this typical Irish exuberance lost him none of his friends. To them it was just a natural kink inseparable from men of Irish nationality, and the safety valve of a nature occasionally stirred into emotional passion on behalf of a country of which he knew nothing and which, in his perfectly sane moments, seemed to him to stand in need of a mental and moral jerk powerful enough to shake it out of ingrained fanaticism and bitter religious hatreds.

CHAPTER VII

Two or three weeks after the reconciliation of Julian and Daisy Osborn, Elsa, now thoroughly American, brought Nina Hopper to the Castle for lunch. In the very becoming uniform of the American Red Cross Mrs. Mahan had just returned from New York where, together with many splendid women who continued to carry on after the hysteria of patriotism had left the country, she had been devoting herself to the returning soldiers. The house was full of conflicting energies. Elsa, a member of the Motor Corps, had been granted several days' leave after a very hard winter and was eager to play tennis, hear all the local gossip, and see something of Gilbert Carlton, for whom she had long cherished a secret and whole-hearted love. Egg-Flip, whose Wednesday morning round had been

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ruined by the necessity of conducting several long-distance telephone calls, was boyishly obsessed with a desire to get lunch over and drive around to the golf course to join his usual foursome. He came out of his den, which more nearly resembled a corner of the Grand Central Railway Station than anything else, carefully made up for golf in an Irish homespun knickerbocker suit which reeked beautifully of peat, although it had come freshly from Brooks Brothers. He found his wife in uniform, Elsa in mufti, and Nina Hopper as smart as usual in a sport shirt with a gaping collar and a skirt whiter than snow.

The German butler, an expert and almost inoffensive person who was permitted to claim Swiss antecedents without challenge, had already served lunch in the amazing dining hall, and George Mahan joined the meal at the fish stage. He cut the soup recklessly and was determined to deal sparingly with the remainder of an excellent menu because he was a little frightened as to his waist line, — as well he might be.

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Nina had been giving Elsa a long and rather caustic account of all the recent excitement in the houses of the Merediths and the Osborns so far as she knew it from a dozen different versions. Neither she nor the Mahans nor any one else in the neighborhood saw any reason to suppose that the blaze which had been started by Julian would spread like a prairie fire into the Castle. Why should it? In what conceivable way could Elsa or her family be concerned with that crisis? They were as safe as people without children in a neighborhood seized by an epidemic of whooping cough.

"Just give me a cutlet, some peas and a couple of spuds," said Mahan, straightening a brilliant tie. "You won't mind if I bolt a little food and get off quick, will you, my dear?"

"We're all in a hurry," replied Mrs. Mahan, who was too obsessed with her job to remember to have powdered her well-formed nose. "I have a committee meeting at local headquarters in twenty minutes, and the two girls are eager for tennis. Leave me the big car, George. I

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must drive back to town after tea. A transport docked this morning and that means a new rush of work. What a life!"

"Yes, but you enjoy it, Mrs. Mahan," said Nina. "What in the world will you do when the country settles down to a humdrum life again?"

"It never will," said George, grasping his chance as he never failed to do. "Our humdrum days are over. The Atlantic is dry and we have no isolation. We're just as much a part of Europe as France and England, and the Monroe Doctrine is nothing but a blank sheet of paper. White rock," he added as the butler approached him with a bottle of Beaujolais. "Don't you know I'm playing golf to-day? That stuff will make me slice like the devil." Then he flew off at one of his inevitable tangents.

"Have any of you seen Mrs. Hicks this morning? She called me up on the 'phone when I was busy dictating letters. I told Stephens to say that I was dead or out or anything else to shake her. Whenever that woman

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crosses my path, I have an uneasy feeling of impending disaster."

A laugh went all round the table, but Mrs. Mahan gave a beautiful imitation of a shudder, and Elsa pretended to kill a mosquito.

"I saw her in the village this morning," said Nina Hopper, "puffing along to the post-office like a tramp steamer. I failed to catch her eye, as usual. I imagine that she's got her spoke in somebody's wheel again. I could see it from the set of her shoulders and the gleefulness all over her face. It was a bad day for Quaker Hill when she came to live here. There are vague rumors that she and Julian had words the night Margaret Meredith came back, but as the Osborn house is closed, and Daisy has gone away, there's no getting to the bottom of that. Fancy their being about to get re-married, those two. It's a funny world."

"It is," said George, "the funniest world we shall ever know. But it will be a dark and dreary place for me to-night if I foozle with my mashie as I did on Saturday. Will you

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ladies excuse me?" He got up from the table. "Being married to the American Red Cross," he added, turning at the door and showing a line of very white teeth, "means that I shan't see you again for several days, I suppose. Well, good luck, my dear. Don't bring any cooties home with you."

And off he went, as eager as a boy to enjoy a holiday, and with all about him that air of the tired business man who has made the amazing discovery in middle life that the earth contains other places than an office building with its flat head poking into the sky. Whatever had been the excuse made by Stephens, Mrs. Hicks had a nasty surprise in store for this excellent American when he returned from his well-earned game.

It was up in her own room, in one of the many angles of that fantastic house, that Elsa presently unburdened herself to her friend on the subject which was making her heart leap and dance. The khaki uniform in which she had worked since the formation of that never-to-be-forgotten corps which has gathered into

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its membership so many of the splendid sisters of the boys who went overseas with the spirit of crusaders, littered the floor. The sunlight of a delicious spring afternoon filtered through the imitation medieval windows, and the room bore little resemblance to that of the pre-war girl who had lived there ever since her mother's marriage to the Irishman. Its table was covered with photographs of men in uniform. There were relics of the war here and there. Mannish looking, much-worn gaiters sprawled in the corners, and a red flag upon which was worked a white star hung in a conspicuous place.

This stood for George Mahan's son and heir who had gone across in November, 1914, with an ambulance, had served in the Lafayette Esquadrille and eventually been transferred with a commission to the American forces and was still in France waiting to be demobilized. With a *croix de guerre* upon his broad chest and the look in his eyes of a man who had found himself in losing his irresponsibility, he was a credit to his father, to the little mother whose

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sweet spirit watched over him and to the country which claimed him. The doll-like girl had blossomed into an alert, capable, well-disciplined little soldier, able to look without shuddering, but with an enormous pity and gratitude, upon limbless men, and those unfortunates paralyzed and twisted by shell shock. The beautiful word Service had given Elsa a personality which nothing else could have developed in her and an unself-consciousness which belongs to every woman who has taken part in the Great Sacrifice.

For a little while the two girls stood at the window together and looked down at a wide vista of Quaker Hill which lay beneath them. Innumerable roofs of red and green and gray broke through a mass of moveless greenery that spread to a misty horizon. A curling road, polished by the wheels of restless cars, lost itself behind a ridge of rocks. Here and there a delicate steeple was silhouetted against an unflecked sky, and up from it all, to those whose ears were musical, rose the quiet song of peace.

Then Elsa shut the door, wheeled about, and

with a glowing face and a touch of excitement turned upon Nina Hopper. "Can you guess why I've rushed home on this leave?" she asked.

With her usual quick laugh the young married woman pretended to string an arrow and fire it. "Love," she said. "Who's the man?"

Elsa mounted a cigarette into a long holder and sent forth a thick ring of smoke into a shaft of sunlight. "You'd never guess in this world. This is romance, and I have n't the faintest idea whether it's going to end happily or not. If I have anything to do with it it will, but the man in question has altered as much as I have, and I have n't seen him since his transport sneaked away in the night with the first of our troops to go abroad."

"It's Gilbert Carlton," cried Nina. "My dear, how exciting. He's here with his sister, you know."

"Of course I know," said Elsa. "I've had three letters from him in the last week, — very short, very friendly and very unhelpful. They

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give me no clue to his present feelings at all, and I can't read into them, although I've tried pretty hard, anything that shows me that he remembers the last dance we had together in the Crystal Room away back in '17. He just says that he wants to see me again while he's staying here. He's going to be in the clubhouse this afternoon, and I have an appointment to meet him there at three o'clock 'to talk over old times', as he puts it. It was for his sake, I don't mind telling you, that I went into the Motor Corps, and even if he's fallen in love with somebody else in the meantime, and it's quite likely, I shall never regret the work I've done. He was on the verge of proposing to me before he went away but shied off at the last moment because you barged in just as he was beginning to frame the proper, stilted phrases."

"My dear, I am frightfully sorry. Why did n't you tell me?"

"It did n't matter," said Elsa. "He's a better man for what he's gone through, and I think that I've improved a bit since then, and if he has n't forgotten all about me in the mean-

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time we shall come together with an absolute crash. That's why I call it a romance. That's why I'm going round to the club now in a state of nervous excitement which positively makes me jumpy. That's why I feel that I'm standing at the crossroads of my life. Wish me luck, dear old thing. It's the least you can do, considering that it was through you that we've not been engaged all this time."

This was said with an outward appearance of self-control to be expected of one who had driven an ambulance through the crowded traffic of New York by day and night, who had shivered at the docks in the early hours of winter mornings and been called out of bed in the first moments of beauty sleep to play her part behind the lines in the greatest drama of all time. But the emotion which lay behind these words burned in the girl's eyes and showed itself in the little tremble of the fingers which held her mannish cigarette holder.

Nina Hopper, herself safely married and happy, made two or three quick steps forward and put her arms round her school friend who,

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only the other day, as it seemed, had been playing at life in the long, airy dormitory in which so many of their mutual confidences had been whispered after lights out. They were women now, both of them, — one by the responsibilities of marriage, the other by the experiences of war work. It was a curious moment for them both, a silent eloquent moment full of affection and hopefulness and deep sympathy, — a charming moment in which two utterly modern girls behaved as their grandmothers would have done under similar circumstances.

CHAPTER VIII

THE big car which carried Mrs. Mahan to the village disappeared as they left the house. They caught a glimpse of a blue-banded cap mounted on a mass of white hair, and a fine, firm profile which ended in a double chin, about which there had been no time to worry. The oddly shaped beds of flowers around the Castle wore the pristine brightness of the spring, and birds busy with their domestic duties flew from tree to tree. All about the garden there were the marks of George Mahan's rampant imagination. Terraces of great stones wound themselves into eights and sixes, crowned copiously with huge urns and chubby Cupids. Flights of stone steps, patterned with moss, led into circles dominated by sundials or the Rubens-like figure of an Italian matron indiscreetly robed. Arches and pergo-

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las and tiny chapels were everywhere and every available space had its bulbous lady or grinning satyr made older than they really were by sun and rain. It was through this probably, to him, royal garden that the whimsical Irishman swaggered after a good dinner, wearing an imaginary crown tilted over one eye, muttering fiery denunciation of the bloody Sassenach from whom he got so many of his ideas. A lively brook ran away below, babbling like a meeting of the Drama League. Over it all hung an exquisite blue canopy unspotted by a cloud.

Mr. Mahan had dashed off to his game in the ubiquitous Ford which was used for station work, and Elsa's own car, painted a grim battleship gray, was resting in the garage. This it needed, and so the girls set off to walk to the Country Club, — a matter of a mile and a half along charming roads, tree-lined and dotted on either side with well-groomed houses. Not much was said by either of them as they walked, Elsa delighting to be once more in feminine clothes two summers behind the fashion plates.

The inevitable number of cars passed them, taking people to the club. In one they saw Margaret Meredith sitting with a girl whose face was new to them.

"How well and happy Margaret looks again," said Elsa.

"And well she may. I told you how she got out of a very bad scrape. Bob and she are inseparable. Awful nice people, both of them."

"Who's she with?"

"I don't know. It's a girl I've seen her with before once or twice. Very pretty and rather intellectual looking. Does things probably. A stranger, I think."

"Perhaps we shall meet her," said Elsa, little thinking that this girl in whom she was only slightly interested was to carry into her life the aftermath of the episode which had already taken the elements of tragedy into the houses of the Merediths and the Osborns.

The club house, a thick-set, imposing building on the edge of the course, wore a wide-awake appearance very different from that to which it had become accustomed during the

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war. Many cars were parked in a convenient place to its left, and others came up and moved away in quick succession. Servants in white duck darted here and there, alert and civil, and through the screened front door one caught a glimpse of a fine and spacious room, homelike and inviting. The wide veranda facing the first tee was alive with women in all the light colors of summer clothes. Some of them were playing bridge while others kept up a lively criticism of the men on the first tee. Several of the tennis courts to the left were in use, and the course itself was dotted with twosomes and foursomes.

Little Wilbur Hicks, looking more unathletic than ever in a shirt with short sleeves and a very dirty pair of gray trousers — he was one of those golfers who dress for the game as though it were coal-heaving — was driving. Frightfully self-conscious from the fact that a hundred feminine eyes were upon him, he topped his ball and watched it die about thirty yards away, wishing irreligiously that the first tee was a mile away from the clubhouse. He was play-

ing with Meredith, who had long ago outgrown the fear of a gallery. The most unobservant person could tell from the slight smile about Bob's mouth that his drive was in the "peach" class.

It was one of those clean, dazzling afternoons of early spring when the trees are bespattered with new leaves and all the grass is fresh and green and the warming sun seems to draw life out of the earth before one's eyes. You caught the glint of the Sound through the trees and made out the facial expression of Long Island, away in the distance.

"Look," said Nina, "Margaret's beckoning to us. Shall we give her a miss in balk or go over?"

"Let's go over," said Elsa. "I like Margaret, and I'm rather curious about that girl."

And so they went over to a little table out in the open which had been placed under the shadow of a huge umbrella. Some people will never know how much they lose by wasting the sun. Margaret was beautifully dressed in things that made no effort to arrest attention

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but came gradually one after another into the eye. There was something green about her wide-brimmed straw hat, a glint of green in her earrings and her thin ankles wore the same cool color. There were no pearls in a conventional state of milky sulks about her neck, and the only ring she wore on her right hand was not in the advertising business. Her charming face owed nothing to the make-up box, and her large and lovely eyes were as clear as the sky.

The girl was duly introduced and, according to Nina, whose standards were high, proved to be "quite one of us." Rather small and put together with a curious neatness, she gave the impression of being very young and unsophisticated, even a little awkward, but her clothes were perfectly right, and she carried off her shyness with a most intriguing smile. She was not stamped with the easily recognizable mark of one of the famous girls' schools out of which the young idea passes into the world with the carriage of a race horse and the nonchalance of a famous *demi-mondaine* — knowing everything, knowing everybody, asking to be amused

and quite prepared to be amusing — but, all the same, she had individuality and character, and there was something about her which seemed to Elsa to suggest tears and sleepless nights and hours of great anxiety. Her name was Mary Miller, which conveyed nothing. There were no Millers among the Quaker Hill Colony.

Margaret Meredith, who seemed to have taken a great fancy to the new girl and to be using all her influence to make her generally known, surprised Nina by stating that the barn on the edge of the Petersons' farm had recently been turned into a studio by Miss Miller and really must be seen to be believed.

"You paint then?" asked Nina, with a very slight air of patronage.

"Hardly that, but sometimes, with luck, my cover designs are accepted by *Vogue* and some of the other magazines. I'm what is called an advertising artist. Did you ever see the drawing of a man and a girl sitting on a wall displaying a good deal of socks and stockings? To my intense joy it was hung in the national gallery

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of store windows. It was the best thing I ever did, and it paid my rent for exactly two months." She laughed as she gave this water-color sketch of the sort of life that she was forced to lead. It might have been disingenuous, but it had the effect of making her listeners feel that she had no desire to sail under false colors or to set herself up as competing with those unlucky people who do not have to work for a living, and go about from place to place crying petulantly, "Horse, Horse, play with me."

It was obvious to Elsa that it gave a good deal of pleasure to Margaret Meredith to see that her protégée was accepted at once, especially by that autocratic young person, Nina Hopper, who either liked at sight and was affable, or disliked equally quickly and froze stiff. There was nothing neutral about Nina. And just as Elsa was about to turn away and look for Gilbert, stirred by a great longing to see him once more, he came out of the locker room of the house and over the clean-shaven grass with a long, swinging stride.

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His civies were conspicuously new, and the fact that the kink had temporarily disappeared from his hair showed that he had just enjoyed a cold shower. No one would have guessed from his easy manner that the sight of Elsa scattered his controlling faculty or plunged him into a state of mental chaos that made him almost forget what language he spoke. "Oh, hello, Mrs. Meredith," he said, "and how's Mrs. Hopper this afternoon?" Very formally he took Elsa's outstretched hand and bowed over it with a low murmur, and then turned cordially to Miss Miller and called her Mary and said something about being awfully glad to see that she had found her way to the Country Club.

If Margaret, Nina and Elsa were surprised to see that those two knew each other and were on the sort of intimate terms that includes the use of nicknames, there was some one who was not. Mrs. Wilbur Hicks, from an inconspicuous place on the wide veranda, had watched this meeting, and the smile that ran along her lips would have made a shiver chill the blood of a

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man in the stoke-hole of a steamship. All about this woman there was that expression of prime satisfaction that pervades those most disconcerting creatures who rout under the surface of things, discover the elements of scandal and cry out in triumph, "What did I tell you?"

No one noticed her except the bureau clerk who watched her reënter the club and dump herself down at a writing desk.

"There ought to be a neat lethal chamber in every community for cats of her sort," he said to himself, still smarting under the recollection of the report which had been sent in by the lawyer's wife to the club manager of his flirtation with the Danish waitress.

Margaret and Nina both wondered why they had never heard any mention of Miss Miller from Gilbert, but Elsa was too glad to see him again to give the matter more than a passing thought. Gilbert had been staying on Quaker Hill for several weeks, and Miss Miller's studio was on Petersons' farm. Why shouldn't they be friends?

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It was Gilbert who broke up the little group and led the way around to the front of the club house. Looking very brown and fit, he marched away between Elsa and Nina Hopper, talking golf. All his hours since he had returned from France had been spent on the course; and the sun had tanned his excellent face, and exercise had given him that fine, strong look which every honest man endeavors to achieve. He drew up suddenly and turned gravely and courteously to Nina. "You did n't say that you were going to play bridge, but I can see that you are, so please don't let us keep you."

Nina's peal of laughter echoed through the world. "Soldiering has broadened the American man," she said dryly. "Look me up on your way home. I will give you a cocktail, — almost the last you will get under my roof." And away she went, throwing a quick excited glance at Elsa. A good sportswoman, this delightful specimen of cool youth.

For a moment, in a sudden panic, Gilbert half wished that some one would appear to pre-

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vent the heart-to-heart to which he had been looking forward so wistfully for an unaccountable number of months. Then he squared his chest and pulled himself together and with a businesslike air that was almost comic turned to Elsa. "Now," he said, "let's find a spot among those trees over there where we can talk undisturbed. I have more to say to you than would fill a book, — that is, if you'd like to hear it."

Elsa, whose color had returned to normal, nodded. How well she understood his trouble. "I always like to hear you talk," she said, with a little glint in her eye which broke down all barriers and nervousness.

And then these two, who had not seen each other for so long a time, crossed the wide drive and the springy turf on the edge of one of the greens and made their way to a place where the fairies met every night and set words to the music of a rippling stream. The inevitable rocks, which must have given the Pilgrim Fathers a considerable amount of worry, were under the shadow of many trees, and the first fresh

tangle of undergrowth made that little corner of the earth a Garden of Eden.

"Sit here," said Gilbert, "and let's get down to things." He pointed to a flat stone on which he laid a sweater, and he sat himself down at Elsa's feet and looked up into her face.

There was a little pause during which these two young people gazed at each other like children meeting again after a long absence. "Well," she said trying to laugh, "what do you see?"

"Heaps of things," he answered. "You've grown for one. I believe I'm a little afraid of you."

"Why?"

"I left a girl. I come back to find a woman. I know how you've done it too, and I wonder whether I've done anything which justifies me in daring to tell you even the first of the things that I've been saving up all this time."

All this was good, — better than Elsa had ventured to hope. It showed her not only that she was not forgotten but that, like herself, Gilbert had had a dream to live up to and strive

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to realize. Her heart began to tumble strangely and it was of no use trying to prevent her lips from trembling. This was romance, her very own romance. She had played the game like a little soldier for the sake of this one particular man, and as she sat in that place made beautiful by the hand of God, she gave renewed thanks that he had come out of the shambles untouched by anything except that great pity which is in the heart of every man who placed his body in the way of the monster of aggression.

"Elsa," he went on, speaking eagerly, "months ago, it almost seems years ago, I was going to ask you to be my wife. I'm glad I didn't because you would have turned me down. I knew it and I hesitated. In those days I was a pretty average outsider who had been messing about. I had never pitted myself against realities and I wasn't fit for you. I don't think I'm fit for you now, but I've cleaned up, and always your face and your eyes have been in front of me and you have been the lodestar towards which I have been working. I am out of the army. I have got to begin all



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over again. I don't quite know what I 'm going to do, but if there is the smallest hope of my being able to look forward to building a future with you I 'll work like a man possessed. Is there, — please? ”

There was a little tremble in her voice when Elsa answered him. “ If you were a pretty average outsider in those old days so was I,” she said. “ I have n't been able to stand in trenches and shudder at the sight of wounds and mangled men, but like you I have utterly chucked the idiotic ways of peace times. I 'm cleaned up too and because I have been able to be of use for the first time in my life the habit has grown upon me. I want to go on being of use and I want to be of use to you. So go ahead, Gilbert, and every single brick that you make shall be the foundations of the little house in which you and I will live together, and at least half of every brick shall have something in it of me.”

She held out her hand and he caught it and drew her to her feet and took her lips.

And as he did so a letter was placed in the

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hands of George O'Gorman Mahan. It was in the writing of Mrs. Hicks and ran as follows: "Before you consider Gilbert Carlton as the husband of the charming Elsa ask him about the meaning of his friendship with Mary Miller, the girl who swore that she was caught with Julian Osborn at the hotel at Baltimore."

CHAPTER IX

"SEEM happy? I *am* happy," said Mary Miller, washing her brush in a tumbler of water and drying it on the shepherd-like overall without which no man or woman can possibly be an artist. "The sun's shining. I had bacon for breakfast. I have enough orders for work to be certain of my bread and butter and jam until the end of September and sufficient optimism to imagine art editors scrambling over each other to provide me with all I need for the winter. Happy! Ask me another." She foolishly omitted to knock wood.

Her laugh was contagious, and although the sight of her awoke all his sympathy and the knowledge of her courage made him indefinitely ashamed of his own easy-going life, Eric Peterson caught it, and the young duet rang through

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the studio which no longer knew itself as the ramshackle potato barn, the eyesore of the neighborhood.

From where he lay on the chintz and cushioned covered thing which, made of sugar boxes, passed admirably for a settee, within an arm's reach of the flat table upon which Mary Miller was coloring her new design for a magazine cover, young Peterson was not able to see the pompous parental mansion whose white walls and red roof gleamed between the leaves of trees no older than his father's prosperity. Nor could he catch the fat hum of his mother's opulent car as it took her into the model village, there to perform her usual suspicious round of the obsequious grocer's store and put meat, fish, eggs and vegetables through a stern examination. But in his mind's eye he saw it all, with the wealth and the security which it represented, and being deeply in love with this courageous girl it filled him with a sharp and totally new sense of humiliation to know that he spent as much unearned money in a few months on clothes and hair tonics and cigarettes as

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she earned during the whole of a year by infinite labor, — this lonely unit in the great army of marchers along the street of adventure.

Hill, Yale and a ready-made seat in his father's office, as the only son of that immensely able man who had built up a huge business on the foundations of his own father's efforts, — this was the velvet way along which young Eric Peterson had walked. He belonged to the aristocracy of democracy, a quick proceeding in the only country where individual effort inevitably finds its reward and where every man has an equal chance on the ladder which leads from nothing to everything. "An awfully decent chap," was the description generally applied to Eric Peterson, Junior, to which may be added that his calm acceptance of things as he found them, a delightful indolence for everything except games and a most happy facility for dressing himself to the Nth degree of perfection were overlooked by his ambitious parents because of his disarming smile, his consistent amiability and his invariable reply to all

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anxious inquiries as to when he was going to take life seriously, "Oh, my dear old thing, please let me find myself. After all, I'm frightfully young."

Although his father daily hoped to see his boy at work in the office, and his mother was doing her best to throw him in the way of Dorothy Kester, the daughter of equally rich people, with a view to matrimony, it was characteristic of Eric Peterson to be lying in a suit of golf clothes imported from England on the sofa of a hard-working artist in the middle of a busy week with a proposal on the tip of his tongue, without giving a single thought to the sense of deep and extreme disappointment which would affect both his parents when he announced the fact that the future Mrs. Eric Peterson was the little unheard-of piece of feminine flotsam who had been permitted to turn their old cow barn into what she called a studio, — a person they vaguely remembered to have seen picking wild flowers on the outskirts of their property and who hung on to existence by the skin of her teeth, painting

things of which nobody ever heard. It is one of the ironies of life or more probably one of the laws of compensation that the sons of rich men very seldom walk along the path pursued by their fathers and very frequently riot through the hard-earned fortunes which these men have built up on the sweat of their brow.

Eric Peterson was a young man who would have been amazingly surprised if told that there was any one thing on earth that he should not and ought not to do if he made up his mind to do it. But for two admirable reasons he would never join the list of only sons who rioted. Mentally he was an artist; by nature he was a poet. He had made up his mind to marry Mary Miller if she would have him, and the best thing he did was to devote the working hours of many days to lying on her modest sofa made of sugar boxes to watch her smile, to admire the merry glint in her blue eyes, to be fascinated by the delicious way in which her fair hair went into curls round her ears, to offer small criticisms as to the coloring of her designs — and be surprised when she took them

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— and to look forward with quite enormous delight to the moment when he could lift her out of the renovated cow-barn, with its gas stove upon which she cooked her meals, and pile at her feet every mortal thing that money could buy. To this young philosopher, who accepted the state of things in which he found himself with no more active gratitude than one accepts a sunny day or a pleasant vista of countryside, Mary Miller was a sort of melody, something very sweet and rhythmic who would presently, when he thought fit to become serious, guide his life and wander with him among the pleasant spots of the world,— a companion as delightful to the eye as to the mind. Let Wall Street hang itself. Let his father continue to pile dollar upon dollar. They had their uses and he knew precisely how best to spend them. He was modern, — ultra-modern. He agreed as to that. Who had made him so but his parents? And in addition to this he had nice kinky hair, a straight nose with a blunt tip, a mind totally free from all guile, a happy and contented disposition and a

talent for making everything center round himself which amounted to genius.

Nothing from nowhere, Mary Miller was a little disingenuous when she announced the fact that she was happy merely because she had had bacon for breakfast and saw her way out of immediate money troubles owing to the fact that certain editors had given her orders for a series of magazine covers. She was tremulously aware of the fact, — how could she help it? — that this very perfect young person was in love with her; that eventually, at his own good time, he would make a colloquial declaration of his love, probably asking her to be his wife as he would ask her to go riding or to play a round of golf. But she understood him through and through. She knew every particular step which had led up to his present condition of physical and mental modernity. Behind his semi-humorous expression she sized up the touch of poetry that was in his soul, and she knew all the excellence of the man that was latent in his nature, and which his training and his environment had never called upon him to

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use. He was by no means a hero in her eyes; as a practical working girl she rather disliked heroes, but she had discovered that he was a gentleman and she was proud of him for that. Weeks ago she had given him her adorable little heart, and she now revelled in the luxury of the certainty that in his mind she was already Mrs. Eric Peterson, the girl about to be introduced to the leisure and the luxury of wealth which he had not been obliged to disturb himself in earning and which would be supplied to him in the future by a kind and thoughtful parent to whom work was second nature and who must regard it as a privilege to continue to perspire for the sake and for the benefit of a son who was the flower of Hill and one of the permanent blossoms of Yale.

And so that was why she was happy, — as indeed she well might be. It would presently devolve upon her, she told herself gladly, to work a miracle by making this boy a familiar figure in the office of Peterson and Son. Like all prospective wives she looked upon the man she loved as a child.

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"Look," she said. "How do you like it?" She did n't hold the design up for him to gaze at. She left it flat upon the table in order to have the pleasure of watching him unfold himself and go to the effort of crossing several feet of her plain, unpolished floor.

"Yes," he said finally. "I like it. That blue has depth, and the daring way in which you have made that queer female measure at least nine feet is very jolly. The peacock's tail hanging from the sky, the daffodils growing among the clouds and the light from the cloudy sun fill me with joy. What a pity the war's not still on. Think what a corking touch of color this would make on the slimy walls of dugouts." He caught her eye and laughed, because he saw in it a look which proved to him that she "got" that he was talking absolute piffle from the sheer joy of living. He was just about to seize the opportunity to take both her hands and conquer the quiver in his voice and say "I love you" when the door opened abruptly and smashed his intention into a thousand pieces. There stood Margaret Meredith,

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and with her came an indefinable sense of anxiety and distress.

To both these young things the unexpected appearance of Bob's wife, much as they liked her, was colossal in its indiscretion. Weeks and weeks of philandering had been used to lead up to that moment. To Eric the disturbance was like nothing so much as a misprint in a highly finished sonnet, and as he drew back disappointed but perfectly polite and gave Margaret a cheery good-morning, he said to himself, "Well, there it is, old thing. I'll have to wait until the moon's up, that's all. It's got to be done to-day, and after all perhaps I can do it with greater style in a dinner jacket."

Mary Miller gathered at once that the answer to Margaret Meredith's sudden appearance was trouble. She knew the meaning of that line upon her friend's forehead and waited, with a queer sudden catch at her heart.

"I'm awfully sorry to break in upon you," said Margaret, "but —"

The look which passed between the two girls

was quite enough for Eric Peterson. With the gesture of an ex-artilleryman, he shot his left arm forward, glanced at the small wrist watch which he had worn throughout his service in France and picked up his cap which lay upon the sofa.

"I regret to say that I must leave you," he said. "I have a long-distance call to make." He showed his teeth, bowed like Grandison to both girls and strolled forth, tall and slight and highly finished, into the sunlight of that very exquisite June morning, whistling himself out of hearing.

Whereupon Mary added a long string of figures to the credit side of Eric Peterson's private account, and Margaret jumped into the middle of things.

"I've just had this note from Frankie Mundy," she said. "I brought it round at once. I'm terribly worried."

Mary Miller said good-by to her work for at least an hour, shot a tender and admiring glance after the man with whom trouble did not seem to be acquainted, and braced herself up.

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She and Fate were not good friends. What had he sent to her this time?

It was one of Frankie's characteristic notes, — a little self-conscious, in a large and upright hand — and it ran like this.

“ I dined at the Castle last night, Margaret dear, and came away early, a prey to many conflicting emotions. Mrs. Mahan had gone off to New York on her Red Cross business and so Elsa played hostess to Kenneth and Marjorie Holbrook, Nina Hopper, the Kesters, the Claytons and that dear man Allen Rumsey just back from Russia with a mouth full of strange warnings. Gilbert Carlton was there too, and it gradually came to me during dinner that behind the apparent normality of the whole proceeding there either had been or there was going to be a domestic eruption. I could see that not only did Mr. Mahan want to confide in me but also Elsa and Gilbert. The two men missed their opportunity and I only was able to snatch a few minutes with Elsa. This was quite enough to keep me awake all night.

“ My dear, you have never told me the full

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and complete story of your recent trouble, but there have been rumors, — there always are. From what I caught from Elsa, or rather from what Elsa forced upon me, it appears that she became engaged to Gilbert Carlton this afternoon, but that just before dinner, when she was in the seventh heaven of happiness, the stepfather refused to give his consent to the engagement until he was informed of the relationship between Gilbert and that nice little friend of yours, Mary Miller. You may imagine in what sort of mood these two young people went through dinner; and how disturbed that kind-hearted, sensitive and sentimental Mr. Mahan was. I don't think that any of the seismic movements were caught by the other people, but I am easily affected by these things, ate nothing and was very hungry when I arrived home. In all my half-waking dreams during the night the name of Mary Miller, which means nothing to me, was somehow associated with your name in my mind. So I am sending you this letter by hand to put you on your guard and to let

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you know that there must be some one in our Quaker Hill community who is burrowing. If, my dear Margaret, you have hidden anything, I think you 'd better dig it up and hide it again. I don't know why I say this or what Mary Miller is to you. I am just obeying an impulse. But there is that startling element of intuition in my pen which, according to the psychological novelist, belongs exclusively to women. (It does n't. There are some men who have it to a far greater degree. The milliner man and the palmist, for instance.) That's all. My love to you. Frankie."

As Mary Miller handed the letter back to Margaret, a great cloud seemed to pass between the sun and the earth, and the disappearing figure of Eric Peterson was blotted out as by a fog. But she refused to become panicky or to cross her bridges until she came to them. What was the use? "Mrs. Mundy," she said quietly, "is a splendid woman, but she knows more than she wants you to think that she does."

The letter trembled in Margaret's fingers

and in her eyes there was a look of great fear. "Some one has found us out," she said. "That lie is coming up again like a weed. It's in Elsa's garden and before we know where we are, it may be in yours." She put her hands over her face.

In her alert imagination Mary Miller could see herself and her friend standing on a small island, the edges of which were crumbling before a strong, incoming tide. But she had gone arm in arm with trouble a long way up the road and had achieved the faculty of courage. "Well," she said, "let's face this thing coolly and practically. What I think is going to happen is this, and we must be prepared for it. There is a mischief-maker at work,—probably the Mrs. Hicks you've told me about. Being unhappy herself she can't bear to see others happy. She has found out about my having sworn to being at Baltimore with Mr. Osborne and is using it to upset this engagement. According to her I am a disreputable woman, and therefore if Gilbert Carlton is a friend of mine, he is not fit to be engaged to

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Mr. Mahan's daughter. Do you follow me as far as that?"

"Yes," said Margaret.

"Well, everything that follows must come out of the temperament of these three new people who have been touched by the epidemic. Gilbert will not lie down under Mr. Mahan's refusal to allow him to be engaged to Elsa. He will want to prove that there is nothing in his friendship with me that makes him in any way unfit."

"He can do that," said Margaret.

"Can he? How? I can see Mr. Mahan entering the studio. I can see him putting me through a searching cross-examination. I don't know Mr. Mahan, but I have seen him at the Country Club. I like the look of him. He is good-hearted, and as I believe in human nature I shall put all my faith in that and tell him the truth. I shall never again believe in the goodness of humanity if he is not to be trusted."

Very white and very frightened, Margaret eyed her little practical friend with a mixture

of confidence and irresolution. Julian knew. He had told her that Mrs. Hicks knew and had told Daisy. Wilbur Hicks knew, and now Egg-Flip Mahan was to know. How long could it be before the story found its way to the ears of Bob? The lie upon which she stood was as useless a foundation as shifting sands, and it was spreading through the Quaker Hill Colony like water from a broken dam. There was the further complication of young Eric Peterson, who could offer paradise to the plucky girl whose loyalty had put Margaret back into her home, — poor Margaret, who had wandered from the straight path and in finding her way back to it had set fire to the undergrowth of Quaker Hill, the heat of which was scorching house after house.

She went over to Mary and kissed her. "I don't know what to say to you," she said. "You make the word Friendship all golden in the dictionary."

Mary Miller's voice broke. "My dear," she said, "I have a sense of gratitude. You must leave this thing to me. Gilbert must marry

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Elsa, that goes without saying. He carried her photograph over his heart all through his service, and look what she did for him. It is a good story and must end happily." She wheeled round, hearing a quick, approaching step. "Mr. Mahan," she added, "already," and squared her shoulders.

CHAPTER X

BUT it was Julian who passed the window. At the same moment both girls caught sight of that profile which had been so expensive and so dangerous.

"I sent for him," said Margaret. "I called him up as soon as I had received this letter. I thought he'd better know. I thought he might be able to help."

"I don't think so," said Mary Miller, but she held out her hand as the door opened.

Julian had the appearance of a man who had recovered from auto-infatuation. He was as good looking as ever, but certain lines of conceit and the petulance of the spoiled person which had marked his face had gone. His old self-consciousness and arrogance had also disappeared. He had reacted well from the operation upon his pride and gained in character.

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Like Margaret he had been brought to look upon life with saner and more honest eyes and it seemed a pity that they were not to be left alone to continue their regeneration.

He had not seen Margaret for several weeks, — not in fact since the night of his reconciliation with Daisy. The touch of her hand awoke the old thrill and stirred the old desire. But he swung himself back instantly to the new path that he was walking with his wife and ordered his thoughts to heel like a pack of obstreperous dogs. "I drove down at once," he said. "What's happened?"

The sight of the man whose face still haunted her in those quiet moments of her day when she relaxed from her self-imposed struggle to wipe him out of her brain was very painful to Margaret Meredith. A thousand memories chimed in her mind like bells and something went through her heart like a red-hot needle. With a supreme effort she controlled herself and was able to speak in an ordinary level voice.

"I thought we'd better meet because some one has been talking. The lie we told is n't

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dead. Its tentacles have caught hold of Gilbert Carlton and Elsa Mahan, and if we 're not very careful Mary will fall a victim too."

Julian took the letter which Mary held out to him and read it carefully and with growing gravity. He could read Frankie Mundy's warning between the lines and could make out plainly enough that Mrs. Hicks was still at work. Once more his imagination winged itself into the den of his old friend Bob. What in God's name could be done to preserve this good man's implicit faith in the woman who represented to him the epitome of all that was most beautiful? That was obviously the question to be faced to the best of their united abilities. It was made all the more difficult from the fact that revenge added to the spite of the lawyer's wife, the limit of whose power of making trouble was not yet reached. But before he could formulate any scheme or listen to any suggestions, sitting knee to knee with the woman who had already suffered enough from his lack of self-control, there was another step on the path.

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"It's Mr. Mahan," whispered Mary. "You two must not be seen. Go in here,—quick." She opened the door in the partition which divided the studio from her tiny kitchen, gave an imperious gesture, watched Julian and Margaret scuttle, with a total lack of dignity, into their hiding place, and closed the door upon them. At all costs Elsa's father must not be allowed to think that he had come upon conspirators. If Mary were handicapped by suspicion in the struggle which lay before her, her faith in human sympathy and kindness would not have a fair chance. She flew back to her table, picked up her brush, bent over her work and hummed a little song. The uncomfortable interview that was about to take place must, she knew, be overheard by the man and woman who had dared to believe that the results of their great indiscretion could affect no one but themselves. The knowledge of the untruth of this most foolish belief was already theirs. They might add something more to it before they emerged.

There was a touch of nervousness in the way

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in which Mr. Mahan cleared his throat as he stood outside the door of the barn and rapped upon it with his knuckles.

"Come in," sang out Mary Miller, in a voice as light as thistle-down.

Dressed in a business suit and wearing a business expression, George Mahan entered the studio. Presumably he had expected to find a bold and brassy person seated there, vivid and vampirish, because his look changed to one of surprise when his eyes fell upon the slight, sweet figure of the girl in her working overall, with her head bent over a table covered with the implements of painting.

"I came to see Miss Miller," he said.

"Thank you," said Mary. "Won't you sit down?"

Under different circumstances there might have been something almost comic in the way in which Mahan sat on the edge of a chair and put his hat under it as though he were in a lecture hall at a Liberty Loan meeting, where he knew that he was going to be called upon not only to empty his banking account but draw upon

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his capital. He looked indeed more like a man who was in trouble himself than one who had come to make trouble. "Lovely weather," he began, fidgeting with his fingers.

"Perfect," said Mary. "He's kind, he's kind," she said to herself. "He's suffered and can be trusted."

"If this girl is n't a good little soul, the very sister of all the flowers, I'll eat my hat," thought Mahan, immediately adding, "go easy, you sentimentalist. A pretty face has made a fool of yer before." Between these conflicting thoughts he did n't know how to begin. And there was a strange and peculiar silence, during which Julian and Margaret ventured to look into each other's eyes. They had hoped never to find themselves alone again, anywhere.

"You're almost the first of the big guns of Quaker Hill Colony to see my old barn since I made a studio of it. How do you like it?"

Mahan glanced about him but made no comments. Instead he shot out a sudden question. "How long have you known Gilbert Carlton?"

"For years and years," said Mary. "His

sister and I were at the same school, and we all used to meet for the holidays at their father's house at Easthampton. Those were in the good days before I was turned loose on the world. Why do you ask?"

A dozen terse and rather brutal sentences formulated themselves in the mind of Egg-Flip Mahan, who had come with the fixed idea that he was to deal with a light woman, but under the frank and whimsical eyes of the surprising girl who was obviously a worker like himself, they fell into pieces. "Cards on the table," he said impulsively. "Here are mine." And he produced the letter which had burst in his hands like a bomb and put it face upwards in front of her.

"Am I to read it?" asked Mary.

"Yes, — then you 'll know why I 've come."

Mary picked it up and read it aloud. She wanted the two people who were hiding in her kitchen to hear the indictment. "'Before you consider Gilbert Carlton as the husband of the charming Elsa ask him about the meaning of his friendship with Mary Miller, the girl who

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swore that she was caught with Julian Osborn at the hotel at Baltimore.' — Have you asked him?"

"I had to," said Mahan.

"What did he say?"

"I could n't tell you all that he said. He is only just out of uniform. Our men who went over have a way of expressing themselves which may not be repeated to girls of your age." For the first time the ebullient and irresistible humor of the gray-haired Irishman showed itself round the corners of his mouth.

Mary laughed. "He's a good soldier," she said, "and although you won't repeat his remarks, I know that I can be grateful for them. All the same, you don't believe him or you would n't have come to me."

"A shrewd thrust," said Mahan. "I wanted to believe him. But this letter makes an ugly insinuation and I have come to look into it. You can't blame me for that. Elsa is as good as a daughter to me, and when a father is going to give his little girl away in marriage he has to be careful that the man who takes

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her is fit to have her." His voice broke a little, and he bent his head over so that he might hide the sudden trembling of his lips.

Mary leaned forward and touched his hand with her fingers. "I quite understand," she said. "Your cards are on the table. I will lay all mine out before you."

In the next room the two victims of their own misconduct held their breath.

Mahan looked up and in the eyes which held his own he saw no guile. After all, he thought, Julian's a devilish handsome fellow, and the poor child may have loved him. "Thank you," he said.

"I won't ask you to give me your promise not to repeat anything I am going to say. I believe that's quite unnecessary."

If there was one thing which Mahan liked more than any other it was to be trusted and to be taken on his face value as a man of honor. Many good deals and several bad ones had resulted from this little weakness. He wondered how she knew of it, — this young thing who seemed to be trying to earn a living in a place

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which he knew to have been occupied not so very long before by the common domestic cow. Was she just a little too shrewd to be as free from trickery as she would have him believe? "A good beginning," he said, dryly.

"I was not caught with Julian Osborn in a hotel at Baltimore," said Mary quietly. "I have never been to Baltimore, and I have only met Julian Osborn twice. It is true that I stood up in court and swore to the fact that I had registered as Mrs. Meredith, but I did it in order to repay Margaret for having saved me from having to become the mistress of a married man."

"You did!"

"Yes, and I'll tell you why. A year ago I was riding in a bus in Fifth Avenue with almost my last dime. I sat next to a girl I'd never seen before. She was beautifully dressed and was as far away from the sort of trouble which dogged my heels as an aeroplane is from a swamp. I don't know why, but she spoke to me, and as she was getting out asked me to go somewhere and have lunch with her. Per-

haps she could see that I looked hungry. As we sat over a small table in a restaurant she drew out of me the little story which is so very ordinary and which in ninety-nine cases out of a hundred makes bad women of good girls. When lunch was over, — the first lunch I had tasted for quite a number of days, — she walked back with me to my dingy little room and left a check on my table which not only paid all my debts but which made it possible for me to say ‘no’ to the man who wanted to put me into a place where he could find me waiting for him whenever he chose to come. This was the sort of kindness which sends thanksgiving to the feet of God surrounded with the fragrance of spring flowers, and I shall never forget it as long as I live.”

There was another but shorter silence. Julian turned to Margaret, and his lips shaped the words “Who could?” And she gave him a faint little smile but slipped her hand over her heart.

When Mahan spoke it was with the sort of Cork in his accent that only came into it now

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when he was deeply moved. "It's a moighty good wurld," he said.

"And then my turn came," continued Mary, steadying her voice. "Like the rest of the people in Quaker Hill you were interested in the action brought by Mrs. Osborn against her husband, in which Mrs. Meredith was named as corespondent. In the middle of the case I offered my services, played the part suggested by the lawyer, and was able with everlasting joy to pay back something of my debt to the woman who had rescued me by sending her home to her husband clothed in chastity. — Do you want to know anything more about the girl who is a friend of Gilbert Carlton's or why such a friendship should prevent you from agreeing to his marriage to your daughter?"

Mr. Mahan sprang up and held out his hand. "Yes," he cried out, "I should like to have the honor of welcoming her to my house and of begging her to give me her friendship."

The two hands closed warmly and for a moment nothing more was said, — simply because the Irishman who had struggled with life and

won and the little girl who had escaped from the street of adventure without a stain on her skirt were unable to speak. And in the small room behind the partition Julian and Margaret looked at each other once more, aghast. Here was another man to know their already hackneyed secret. How long would it be before some one broke in upon Bob's fool's paradise and shattered his dream?

"If I hurry I can catch the damned train that stops at every station. I've a big day's work before me," said Mahan, and on his way to the door he blew his nose loudly, — too loudly. He was something of a comedian.

"Your hat," cried Mary Miller, and she dived for it and held it out. "I'll throw an old shoe after the bride and bridegroom."

The Irishman, descended from kings, took the hand once more, bent low and kissed it royally.

And when Julian and Margaret came back into the studio they were met by Mary Miller. "It was a certainty," she said triumphantly. "Worry no more."

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“ But there ’s Bob,” said Julian.

“ He would n’t believe it.”

“ And there ’s Eric,” said Margaret.

Mary tilted up her chin. “ Nothing could shake his faith in me,” she answered.

But once more she forgot to knock wood.

CHAPTER XI

MR. WILBUR HICKS was in a commuting mood. He had been playing bridge till three in the morning. He had just cut himself with a safety razor, which in itself is a paradox, and he had only thirty-one minutes in which to dress, eat his breakfast, be driven a mile and three quarters to the depot and catch the 8:02 to town. These were shattering circumstances enough. They were made harder to bear because the sun was golden, the trees were deliciously green, and the Quaker Hill bird orchestra was screaming its matutinal chant. If the little lawyer had been silky in his replies to his care-free wife and had worn anything approaching a smile he would have been a freak and an impostor rather than an ordinary human man.

The commuting rasp was in his voice when he

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opened the bathroom door, put his head over the banisters and called, "Hey, somebody, bring my breakfast up to the sleeping porch and be quick about it."

Mrs. Hicks, who for some reason or other had never in all her married life allowed Wilbur to have his breakfast alone — probably she had read "Hints to Wives" in the columns of the *Ladies' Home Journal* — was dressed; her all too vivid peroxide hair had been bundled up in a *dégagé* manner; her somewhat massive face had been powdered in a bad light, which gave her a strange resemblance to a careless Pierrot, and she wore a silk sweater of a hard, aggressive blue. Great and very beautiful faithfulness was called upon to make this good lady an acceptable breakfast companion under the most pleasant and leisurely circumstances. Eleven o'clock in the morning on the shady balcony of a charming summer hotel facing a placid sea, — yes, if the devil drove. But for a commuter who had cut himself and who had only thirty-one minutes in which to get to the station —

"Come in in your dressing gown, Wilbur,"

she cried out, clearing a round table in the middle of the porch for the breakfast tray which jingled its way upstairs.

“Dressing gown! Do you think I’ve got time to play the society lap dog? Dressing gown!” The rest of the sentence was luckily lost in the music of turned-on water.

There followed in inevitable order the usual commuting sounds, — the bitter oath at the mischievous disappearance of a collar stud; the cry of agony over the broken boot lace; the noise of a shower of collars falling on a tile floor and the yell of “who-the-what-the” because that comb had disappeared, — and all the while the remorseless minute hand of the watch performed a marathon behind a bland and open face.

Without coat or waistcoat and with a huge piece of cotton wool sticking to his Adam’s apple Hicks emerged, stumped sharply across the bedroom and onto the sleeping porch, in which no one slept. “Tea,” he snapped, making a dive at the toast dish. “Why not coffee?”

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“ Well, but yesterday you said — ”

“ Yesterday ’s dead. Somebody might have known that I ought to have coffee this morning. Did n’t I lose three hundred and fifty dollars last night? Oh, curse this tie! ” It was a bow with spots on it, curious spots that looked like microbes, — cheese microbes under a magnifying glass. A nice tie, imported, — but it would n’t work and off it came with a rip. With a piece of toast in one hand, another piece in his mouth and with the most complete list of naval words on his tongue Hicks made the return journey to the bath-dressing room, caught his feet in two suits and a very debauch of collars which were all mixed up with the bath mat, and made a dash at the nickel rod on which hung an abnormal collection of neckwear. Nothing but a dark one seemed to him to be appropriate that black morning, and in an anxious endeavor to select it without disturbing the others they all, of course, slithered to the floor, a mass of clashing colors. Many of them were club ties and looked as though they had been designed as a test of color blindness.

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"Let me tie it," said Mrs. Hicks, standing broadly on the threshold of that befuddled room.

And that did it. Hicks screamed like a horse whose stable is on fire and jumped high into the air in the manner of one of those diaphanous creatures of uncertain years who riot to Mendelssohn's Spring Song among rocks and trees. "Oh, my God," he said, as well he might, and in performing that odd but human folly of spoiling his face to spite his nose, tied a bow tie into a sailor's knot. Then once more he sallied forth to stave his hunger. But when the tea burned his tongue and the egg was found to be too lightly boiled, and salt somehow got on the cereal instead of sugar, and through it all the warning honk of Henry Ford came loudly from below, his language can safely be left to the sympathetic imagination of all who have ever commuted or have ever had to do with commuters. Added to this was that most irritating of all things, — the deadly cheerfulness of the woman who had no train to catch. Mrs. Hicks had obviously risen from her couch

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a happy and contented woman. Her eye was clear, her gold bag bulged with dollars won the night before, and the city was going to remain hidden behind a long stretch of charming country in its first sweet flush of early summer.

But Hicks, though quite unconsciously, for he was a kindly little man, left something behind him which was to send his wife's complacency into mid-air like a scrap of paper in a March wind. Following him downstairs to speed her parting worker she asked a question which must have run through her dreams. "What was that about engagements that Nina Hopper said to you last night?"

Hicks put his head out of the window of the Henry which was used for station work, — the big car, of course, naturally being at the disposal of Mrs. Hicks. "Oh, I don't know," he said. "Something about Carlton and Elsa Mahan, Eric Peterson and, by gosh, that Mary Miller girl —"

He would have stopped to go more deeply into this last surprising thing, which then dawned upon him for the first time in all its

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amazement, but the car, if it can be called a car, butted forward, dived down the incline of the drive, took the angle into the main road on one wheel and disappeared.

Mrs. Hicks went back to the breakfast table over which it was her wont to dally royally for at least an hour while she searched the morning paper for suicides and divorces. It gave her a delicious sense of well-being and smoothness to know that her little man was sweating so hard to fill her life with luxuries. That morning, however, she took back with her two deep lines on her forehead. Carlton and Elsa engaged! After all her endeavors then, these foolish people had committed themselves to inevitable unhappiness! What, she asked herself, was the use of a woman attempting, at great inconvenience, to play the part of benefactress in such a headstrong world? Well, there was many a slip 'twixt the cup and the lip. She had a black mark against Elsa for a piece of sarcasm which rankled often. She would see that, even yet, things should not run smoothly to an altar. And as for Gilbert, who had three

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times recently refused to play golf with her on excuses that were as empty as discarded milk bottles, — let him look out! She always got her own back.

In regard, however, to this new engagement between no less a person than Eric Peterson and that little minx who camouflaged herself as an artist and who had very obviously planted herself down on the edge of the Petersons' place for the sole purpose of snatching that silly boy, — ah, here indeed was a chance! The brain of the mischief-maker which, if it were employed in something useful would certainly make a fortune, started to work, and there opened up to Mrs. Hicks possibilities in which she fairly gloried.

In all well-managed communities there ought to be an unwritten law that the Mrs. Hicks of this world, of whom there are so many, should be dealt with by a general court martial and sentenced to deportation to another but distant community without the option of a fine. Indeed, it would be a blessed thing if civilization went one better than this and provided a prison

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in every State in which feminine mischief-makers should all collect, there to play their tricks upon themselves, isolated from the world in a hard stone mansion surrounded with a cage of barbed wire, without a telephone and devoid of postal services. The millennium would then be well in sight.

And yet, to be strictly fair, the present mode of life has much to do with the making of these community pests. Here, for instance, was peroxide Anna, with absolutely nothing to do — because after all no woman dare interfere with her servants, if she is lucky enough to have any — in a house in which there was every conceivable comfort, surrounded by several acres of pleasant garden in which she might not touch the flowers for fear of breaking off relations with the gardener. A hard-working little husband disappeared at an early hour and reappeared in time to dress for dinner. There was the whole day upon her hands, no anxieties as to how to meet the monthly bills, pay the ever increasing wage list or make daily visits to the village for the purpose of prov-

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ender,— because the telephone had come along to undermine personal energy and effort. A woman in the early forties, healthy, as hard as nails, indeed harder, provided for in every particular not so much through love as owing to convention, what else could this woman be than precisely what she was? Conditions had deliberately shaped her as a mischief-maker and nature had taken a considerable hand in the deal.

The system is against these Hicks women; the tyranny of servants assists them, and the fact that it is no longer considered good form for a husband to have a little whip hanging in the hall which he may apply with great benefit from time to time does n't help things. The whip, on the contrary, is now in the hands of the wife, and the result is obvious. It's a mad world, my masters, and greatly in need of reconstruction.

After a brief review of recent events in Quaker Hill and of the trump cards that were in her spatulate hand, the lines went out of Mrs. Hicks's forehead. Singing with a voice which

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greatly resembled that of Galli-Curci with a severe cold, she did her gleaming hair, dressed herself with particular care, killed time for an hour or two in making long-distance calls to other women in the same dangerous condition and then, like a cubist's idea of an herbaceous border or a rainbow in a very vivid sky, went forth and turned her steps towards the Peterson house, there to interview the at present unsuspecting mother of the whimsical Eric.

The smooth road was smoother than ever. The houses on both sides of it had stood out clearly defined during the dreary winter months. If their lines were hard nothing had softened them. At respectful distances from each other there they were behind their leafless screens and nothing could alter the fact. They wore the look of men in the most unlovely state of nature waiting for examination by the draft doctor. They were ashamed but resigned. But all that had altered now. Spring had arranged about them her annual camouflage. A corner of roof, an elbow of

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veranda, a stack of chimneys, a row of upper windows, — that was all. Sturdy Italians were cutting the lawns or squirting the blazing flower beds with something to kill the pestilential bug. All the trees were heavy with leaf, even those of the slim silver birches whose branches are so delicate. Here and there the sudden red of a Japanese maple stood out like a Kipling verb in a provincial paper. A spotless sky hung over everything and the air shimmered with sunlight. The exquisite quietude was broken only by the little songs of birds, the occasional passing of a tradesman's motor and by the intermittent duet of distant carpenters hammering nails into wood. It was a day and a place for love and laughter and kindness.

But the blood of this woman as she stumped square-shoulderedly along began to tingle when she realized the vast possibilities of her power. Julian imagined that he and Daisy had made a new start. They had left Quaker Hill for a time, been married again and were living, poor fools, at the Ritz. Gil-

bert and Elsa were, as it turned out, engaged to be married, and somebody had spoofed the old man into giving his consent. It was easy to upset that. Here was this Peterson affair, intimately connected, of course, with the girl who called herself Mary Miller and probably was n't. There was much good stuff in that. But, — and this was what sent Mrs. Hicks's blood racing through her veins, — how about Bob Meredith, so simple and so blind, who had returned to gaiety and thankfulness and was treating that wife of his as though she were a Madonna?

“ Oh, heavens,” she said to herself, “ who says that Quaker Hill is dull, or that a woman who lives in the country has nothing whatever to do?” And having allowed this thought to sprout joyously in her mind, Mrs. Hicks, true to breed and to type, immediately began to hedge. “ Mischief-making, people might call it,” she added to herself, hitching one shoulder, “ but that shows how superficial they are and careless minded. What sort of a place would the world become, I should like to ask

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them, if every living soul went through life utterly indifferent and callous to moral laws and social codes and made no attempt whatever to put things right? I am a reformer. That's what I am, utterly unrecognized. I am one of the women who help to bring about prohibition, — and keep a secret cellar; who censure the films, having reveled in whatever is salacious in them first; and who dig into novels to find pornography and take jolly good care that nobody else shall enjoy it." Her thoughts stopped short at this point, and her attempt at self-deception failed. She laughed with peculiar glee at what she inwardly termed her pretty wit and was well pleased generally. What she congratulated herself upon as a sense of humor was in reality nothing but a sense of the ridiculous, — a very different thing.

Once, years before, in another community, a little woman, newly married, upon whom Mrs. Hicks had diabolically experimented, had held up her hands to heaven and cried out, "Good angels, help me to put Anna Hicks into a straight jacket!"

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The good angels had failed to hear on that occasion and Mrs. Hicks continued to flourish. But optimism is a blessed thing, and even yet there is a chance that some one may sit in judgment and work a rightful vengeance.

CHAPTER XII

THE purring of a Rolls Royce presently made itself apparent between the voices of the birds. Mrs. Hicks turned. It was the Peterson car. She knew it anywhere and hankered after it always. She raised her hand and the car drew up. In it was sitting the industrious Mrs. Peterson, every moment of whose day was filled with small deeds of usefulness because she did not fear her servants, had one of those conscientious noses which poke into everything and an incurable habit of going into places where housewives fear to tread. From the smile of benign satisfaction which rested on her rather sharp face it was obvious that she had just returned from her daily inspection of Peck's market. Everything was just in, and she had spent a wonderful hour in going over

baskets of spring onions, new potatoes, early peas and warm strawberries, to say nothing of carrots, beets, parsnips and the succulent rhubarb, which luckily Eric was old enough to be able to refuse without having his hands spanked and his pocket money docked.

Mrs. Peterson and Mrs. Hicks were not on intimate or even ordinary terms of friendship, although, of course, they met frequently and called each other "dear." But Mrs. Hicks was, it must not be forgotten, the wife of a lawyer, and it is always as well to be on friendly terms with lawyers' wives. Anything that may tend to soften the blows which are rendered from time to time by legal gentlemen for the benefit of their services is, to put it mildly, useful. So Mrs. Peterson smiled graciously and said, "Good morning, Mrs. Hicks. May I give you a lift?"

And Mrs. Hicks replied, "Thank you, dear," and added to herself, "It is *I* who am going to do the lifting, and I think that before I've done this morning you will go right through the ceiling."

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"Where can I drop you?" asked Mrs. Peterson, blinking a little at the startling combination of buttercup yellow and hard, aggressive blue.

"If you have nothing to do and can give me about twenty minutes, I hope to be able to put a stop to something that you will not care to happen in your family."

Mrs. Peterson bridled at this and drew her elbows closely into her sides. She considered that she ran her family with the utmost efficiency. She greatly resented the suggestion that anything might happen of which she was not aware, or that if anything had already happened there was any one except herself to put it right. Efficiency was her fetish and her family a religion. "I certainly can give you twenty minutes," she said, in her most staccato tone and ignoring all commas, "but I think you must be mistaken in imagining that all is not well with my family — it's a small one you know and I make it my business to see that everything goes smoothly and happily neither my husband nor my son has any secrets from

me I fail to understand what you mean Mrs. Hicks." It ran like a telegram.

With an enigmatical smile and with a keen sense of enjoyment, Mrs. Hicks gave a little bow. The prosperous lady at her side seemed to think that she had been divinely gifted with the faculty of keeping the door of her house closed against domestic upsets and family dramas. It was funny.

"If it's all the same to you," she said, with the utmost oiliness, "I think it will be well for us to discuss the matter somewhere in your house where we shall not run the risk of being overheard." She gave a glance at the chauffeur's fat neck.

The sharp face grew a little sharper under this innuendo, and the remainder of the short journey was made in silence.

Mrs. Hicks was not, however, going to have it all her own way that morning. The imp which sat on her shoulder was about to make things difficult for once. To her extreme annoyance she saw Eric Peterson and Mary Miller standing together on the veranda which

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faced the drive. The boy, in high spirits and an extremely well-cut suit of speckled Irish homespun, was bending in a loverlike attitude towards the girl, who was leaning against one of the white pillars in a frock which would have made even a late and rainy spring look like summer, — an expensively simple frock of an eggshell blue with a nice touch of pristine white at the neck and wrists.

Mrs. Peterson, whose eyes were not so good as they used to be, failed to recognize in her the young artist who had performed such wonders upon her barn, and whom she had seen at a distance picking wild flowers. It struck her at once that this girl, whoever she was, had breeding and good taste, and gave the same kind of pleasant touch to the rather formal veranda that a charming portrait in pastels invariably gives to a collection of stodgy oil paintings.

“Evidently,” she thought, “a sister of one of Eric’s young friends who lives in one of those large houses near the Country Club.” She was sorry that Mrs. Hicks was with her and was determined to get rid of her as soon as pos-

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sible, so that there might be an agreeable luncheon party.

"I wonder who that old bird is," said Eric. "She must have escaped from the Bronx Zoo, — a cross between a guinea hen and an Armenian owl. We'll have to wait until she's shaken before we can break the news to Mother."

"I'm terribly nervous," whispered Mary. The little hand which Eric touched sympathetically was as cold as ice.

"No need, old thing," he said, with great tenderness. "I'm the apple of my mother's eye. When she gets over her disappointment at my having failed to fall for the girl she wanted me to marry, she'll outdo even me as a Mary Miller fan. She's one of the best, but we've always let her believe that she runs the ship and she's bound to be a little peeved when she finds that we run it for ourselves. It won't last."

He laughed a little but watched his mother's approaching figure with very affectionate eyes. Like his father he had a great admiration and

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respect for the scrupulous and unselfish woman to whom no detail was too small to look into and whose every waking moment was devoted to making her house the one to which both her men returned like homing pigeons. If she were a little rigid and a little stiff-backed in her outlook, and if some of her views were a little too early Victorian for daily use, her credit side far outbalanced the debit, and her consecration to home, husband and son was beautiful and fine.

The contrast between the two women as they came along was amazing. Mrs. Peterson was tall and thin. She had not interfered in any way with Anno Domini and in consequence her hair was nicely gray, her nose proudly unpowdered and her lips their natural color. She wore sensible boots with square toes and low heels, — the sort that are called hygienic. Her dress was as long as dresses used to be in the old days before women began to model themselves upon the wispy females in the pages of *Vogue*, — those disembodied spirits, spineless, chestless and devoid of brain. If she had been an English woman, as she very easily might

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have been, she would have conveyed the impression of belonging to the halcyon days of "our late dear Queen." As it was, she was in every sense of the word a credit to Quaker Hill, and although the younger women laughed at her clothes and made fun of her slightly pedantic way of speaking, they paid high tribute to her mastery of housekeeping, to her astounding energy and to the fact, most wonderful in these times, that she remained the mistress of her servants.

As for Mrs. Wilbur Hicks, with a pink hat perched upon her peroxide hair, her formidable face extravagantly powdered and her hard lips brilliantly red, her short skirt which flung her sturdy figure out of balance, and her white shoes with ridiculously high heels, she seemed a being from another and more vulgar planet, a living example of how a woman should try not to look. It occurred to Eric, whose mind ran to instant imagery, that compared with his mother she was like one of those new white, cheap, flashy buildings that are run up overnight cheek by jowl with a tall, elderly and

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dignified red-stone house, whose many steps lead up to a narrow front door upon which is the incontestable stamp of respectability.

Neither of the young people knew this woman by sight and they were, therefore, quite unaware of the fact that she bore in her hand the metaphorical torch which had already set fire to several of the houses in that charming community.

Eric had not seen his mother that morning because after an orgy of reading in bed — the book was Conrad's — he had had breakfast up in his room and had slipped out afterwards to bring Mary Miller back to be introduced as his future wife. So he went forward with that inimitable touch of old-world courtesy that he had cultivated, bowed his head and kissed her on both cheeks.

"Good morning, my Mother," he said. "How good to see you looking so well. Let me introduce Mary Miller, who has done me the honor to accept my hand and all my father's worldly goods in marriage."

He tempered this absurd remark with that

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glint of humor which was characteristic of him, and he purposely sprung the announcement before the strange lady. First in order that the news should be spread through the community at once, and second because he knew that his mother would not show her surprise before some one who was not a member of the family.

Mrs. Peterson quivered beneath the shock. For a moment the whole world seemed to rock beneath her feet. If some one, for some unexplainable reason, had taken a mallet and hit her suddenly on the bridge of her nose, she could not have felt more pained, more stultified. For her son, who had not yet been persuaded to take anything seriously, to come forward as an engaged man without one preliminary consultation, without having given her the opportunity of meeting this girl quietly and of looking into her antecedents and her suitability — It was a little cruel and certainly more than a little modern. But Mrs. Peterson had the gift of dignity, and the way in which she held out her hand to the girl of whose existence she had been totally ignorant five minutes before

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and said, "Welcome. I am indeed glad to see you," raised her to the dais upon which stand all the great ladies of history.

Deeply sorry for having indulged in the selfish pleasure of saying aloud a line that took his fancy, Eric sensed instantly the distress to which he had put his mother and was extremely proud of her. Metaphorically, he laid every one of his large and unnecessary collection of hats at her feet, — and knew that that was far from being sufficient compensation.

Very white and very nervous, Mary Miller murmured, "Thank you very much," and looked younger and more like a spring flower than ever.

The essence of gleefulness ran through Mrs. Hicks's blood, and the impishness of those gargoyles that grin on the buttresses of Gothic buildings gleamed in her eyes. Somehow or other she had felt that this was to be a good day, and now she knew that she was right. However short a time she might remain upon that veranda, she would leave behind her, if she knew anything about it, chaos and disrup-

tion. Just to think of it! Mary Miller — *that* girl — the future Mrs. Eric Peterson. Not if she knew it, by a long chalk.

Mrs. Peterson immediately turned to her guest. "Mrs. Hicks," she said, "I don't think you know my son."

"Only by sight," said Mrs. Hicks coyly.

To Eric her name conveyed no menace. Hitherto he had been fortunate enough not to come under her baneful influence.

"Mrs. Hicks, — Miss Mary Miller."

"How do you do?" asked Mrs. Hicks, adding to herself, "How will you be when I have done with you?"

To hide the flash of terror which went from her heart into her eyes, Mary bowed. The woman — the woman who knew — the woman who was letting everybody else know — What was she to do? — From that instant she realized that her engagement to the man she loved was in jeopardy, that if Mrs. Hicks were to tell Eric and his mother of her connection with the Osborn-Meredith case, happiness might lie like a dead thing at her feet. The spirit of self-

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preservation seized her. Then and there, in a desperate flash, she made up her mind to fight for the retention of the Bluebird which had flown into her little studio with all the strength that was in her.

The fight began at once.

"Let me see," said Mrs. Hicks, warming immediately to her work, "you must be the Mary Miller who was brought here by Mrs. Meredith."

"No," said Mary, smiling, "I don't know Mrs. Meredith."

Amazement sat on Eric's face.

"Is that so? — But surely you are the Mary Miller who, according to hearsay, has done such wonders with Mrs. Peterson's old barn?"

"Well, I don't know that I've done such wonders with it, but I have made it a very nice place to work in."

"But this is most extraordinary," said Mrs. Hicks. "Are there two Mary Millers then?"

Mary faced her up with her hands clenched together and her heart beating fast. "Very probably," she said, almost singing the words.

"There are two of nearly everybody in the world, you know. Why do you ask?"

Mrs. Peterson and Eric listened to this little duel of conversation with growing surprise, — Mrs. Peterson without any suspicion, Eric with inarticulate amazement.

"Because," said Mrs. Hicks, looking straight at the girl who must be made to squirm and wriggle, "the other Mary Miller certainly could not be the future Mrs. Eric Peterson." She turned and drew the two Petersons into her circle of mischief. "The other Mary Miller, you know," she added, "was the person who came forward in court during the Osborn case and swore that she was caught at the hotel at Baltimore with Julian, and from that you may very easily judge the class to which she belongs."

"Indeed, yes," said Mrs. Peterson.

All Mary's fighting spirit — and how many times she had been forced to use it — came to her rescue. If she were obliged to lie herself black in the face, she did not intend to be beaten — at any rate in this particular bout — by the

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creature who took such a fiendish delight in dropping poison wherever she went. "All this is very interesting," she said quietly. "As a newcomer here, of course, I know nothing of the local gossip. Once before the doings of the other Mary Miller have vaguely come my way, and I think I remember having seen her photograph in one of the papers as having been in motion pictures. But, after all, this must be very boring to Mrs. Peterson and it does n't amuse me. What a lovely view there is from this veranda." She smiled airily, dismissed the subject, and looked all about her with a charming air of appreciation. It was a masterly piece of acting. It left Mrs. Hicks completely winded, Mrs. Peterson with the impression that this girl had breeding, and Eric full of amazed self-questioning.

And then, suddenly remembering that Mrs. Hicks had come to speak to her confidentially, Mrs. Peterson turned politely. "Shall we go in, Mrs. Hicks?" she asked. "I can give you a few moments before lunch."

But Mrs. Hicks felt the need of dealing her-

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self a new hand. The cards that she held had failed to win her any tricks. She was unable to call the girl's bluff. "It's really nothing," she said. "Some other time will do. It's later than I thought and I must be getting along. I'm lunching with Nina Hopper. Good-by and so many congratulations." She smiled upon everybody and stumped away, smarting under her defeat and determined to come back as soon as possible with all the aces and all the kings and the knave which was her constant companion. The girl was a liar then, as well as a light woman. Phew, she had never seen anything like it. The brassy hussy! What audacity to conceive the possibility of marrying into the Peterson family. Well, she had some very pleasant work cut out to frustrate this scheme.

With a sigh of relief, Mrs. Peterson watched the departing figure passing through the sunlight. Mary's hands relaxed, and the strain of fighting left her for the moment. She knew very well, however, that this was only the first round and that she must sharpen her weapons

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for a renewed combat. The next and only possible thing to do, if the Blue Bird were to continue to sing in her house, was to play the game by Eric, — at once, at once.

With all her strength she willed to be left alone with the man in whose eyes she saw a thousand questions, and she gained her point. Mrs. Peterson asked to be excused for a moment and entered the house. Putting her hand on Eric's arm, Mary drew him down the steps and into the summer house which dominated the rock garden, and there she turned upon him.

"Do you love me?" she asked.

"You know I do."

"Do you trust me?"

"To the limit."

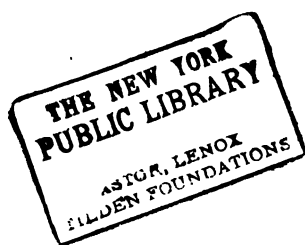
"Will you make me your wife in spite of the fact that I have just lied like a thief?"

And without a moment's hesitation Eric's answer came. "I love you. I've told you so."

"Then listen to this. There are *two* Mary Millers and I am both of them. I am the Mary Miller that you know and I am the Mary



"Will you make me your wife in spite of the fact that
I have just lied like a thief?" *Page 162.* .



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Miller that Mrs. Hicks has heard about, and both of them have never done anything of which you need be ashamed. Will you take my word for that? Will you help me to beat this woman away, and when you know the facts, as you must know them, will you be my champion with your mother and father; will you let me have my chance to prove to them and to you that I have managed to scramble out of the struggle to live with clean hands?"

Her voice broke, but she stood with her chin high and the sun on her fair hair and the spirit of her pluck like a little halo round her head.

And Eric faced her for a moment and looked deep into her eyes. And then he put his arms round her and drew her tenderly all against his heart.

The gong sounded. "Come to lunch," he said, "and let Mrs. Hicks go back to the devil. It's you and me against the world, old thing. I know the two magic words that are to turn the footling Eric Peterson into the proper son of his father, and so do you and so shall everybody. They're Mary Miller."

CHAPTER XIII

ALMOST always you may tell a woman's character by her rings. In nine cases out of ten you may form accurate conclusions as to her antecedents by the way she eats asparagus. Without any exception, you may not only be certain of her character but her antecedents as well, by her house. If, of course, she does n't possess rings, lives in other people's houses and eschews asparagus, then it is necessary to make her acquaintance and delve, or place her among those nebulous people who have neither character nor antecedents. In that case your course of action depends entirely upon her face.

No one lucky enough to see Frankie Mundy at home could make any mistake. She wore one superb pearl on her right hand and on her left not one of the ultra-modern camouflages which women of flippant minds are affecting

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but an old-fashioned, unmistakable wedding ring. Her charming house provided the other key. High up among rocks, with a drive designed by a man whose thoughts ran to pluto-catic cars, it was long and low. It had gables and windows that opened outwards. It did not pretend to be anything but a little house, but its living room was as large as the whole floor plan of most houses, its dining room was a worthy relation and there were a dozen surprising bedrooms in unexpected places. The ceilings were low and beamed, the furniture old cottage stuff from rural England, mellow and unreplaceable, and there was a very lush of color in all the chintzes. Everywhere books. The finical and conventional hand of the interior decorator was conspicuously absent, and the result was individuality. Merely to stand in that ample and cheerful living room with its wide window seats and its hodgepodge of dear old simple bits of oak was enough to assure one of its owner's gift of sentiment, sense of courage, and feeling for form and color.

With a deep and sympathetic knowledge of

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commuting, Frankie chose Saturday nights for her dinner parties. This enabled the men of Quaker Hill not only to do justice to her excellent wines but to continue to do justice to them until the wee small hours without thoughts of that cursed morning train. As soon as the news of Eric Peterson's engagement had spread, the leading spirits of the community found themselves around Frankie's hospitable table again, with a Sunday between them and the daily grind.

The party was given to meet Mary Miller, a fact which, seeing that she was a complete outsider, brought everybody to the little house filled with curiosity, excitement and preconceived ideas. It is a great moment in the lives of women to sit in judgment on one who is not remotely known to them and who will probably take her place in their midst as the wife of its most decorative and most eligible young man. To men, also, who have done the deed which places them either in contentment or unholy regret, it is a stirring thing to meet the girl who has it in her power to do the same thing to a

hitherto happy and unfettered fellow-male and to endeavor to form a conclusion as to what she may have in store for him. There had been, therefore, almost enough loose electricity in the air during dinner to light up the room which Frankie preferred to keep cathedral-like in its dimness. The soft light of shaded candles was not essential to her complexion but she preferred to take no chances.

Gilbert had eyes for no one but Elsa, and she, being secured, pretended to flirt with Kenneth Holbrook. Having been happily married for nine years and lost a good deal of his hair, Kenneth played ball with all the more gusto because he was within hearing of his wife, and she was already rehearsing some beautifully scathing things to say on the way home. Egg-Flip Mahan sat next to Mary Miller and told her, with that nice touch of exaggeration which belongs to the Irish, the full story of his life. With the inverted snobbishness of all self-made men, he gloried in having sold papers in the streets. Nina Hopper had had a birthday recently — her twenty-fifth — and with the check

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presented to her by her admirable and earnest husband had bought the sort of evening frock which, on the smallest provocation, was likely to continue on its way to utter indiscretion. There had been hot words with Felix before leaving the house and relations were strained. The worst of it was that Nina had known from the moment that she saw herself in the dress that it was precisely what Felix unhesitatingly dubbed it. But what is miscalled pride demanded that she should put herself through an evening of untranslatable self-consciousness under what seemed to be one huge, universal eye. She sat on tenterhooks for fear that she might sneeze and become completely discovered. Even the sanest women, it appears, can be affected by the Drama of Spring and the studied lunacy of dressmakers. There was a certain element of the comical in the way in which Felix tried to make out that his wife was not even his sister-in-law.

Allen Scribner Rumsey had had a wearing and anxious day in Wall Street and with the laudable intention of stringing himself up to

his usual level of social fascination had taken four cocktails before dinner. His imitation of Charlie Chaplin after receiving a stunning blow on the head with a crowbar was painful in its excellence. The Rubenesque Olive, his joyous and loyal spouse, was obliged to be merry and bright for two. Her too frequent laugh rattled the old Chelsea on the dresser.

The Peterson family were fully represented, — the worthy mother in a dress designed by herself and carried out by a terrorized local seamstress might have slipped out of an illustration by Du Maurier in the mid-Victorian pages of *Punch*; the father bore a more than ever disconcerting resemblance to the President, and Eric was, as he put it, “fullabeans.” He had made a sensational innovation in evening clothes for the occasion by having bone buttons on his coat.

Susan Kester and Doris Clayton were strictly normal. So was Bob Meredith, who made it his business to draw Mrs. Peterson out on her pet subjects, — servants and geraniums. Margaret had brought her sister, Mrs. Howard

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Bartle, and succeeded in letting only Frankie Mundy see that a new crisis was making her break into hot waves of terror.

As for Mary Miller, in a frock that stood nicely between Greenwich Village and the Ziegfeld Follies, she was having the most uncomfortable time of her life. But she listened with deep attention to George Mahan's eloquence with one ear and with the other to the cheery whispers of young Eric. The hostess, glistening with silver sequins, was in her best form and on the face of it the party was a very great success. If the state of mind of Lilla Bartle had been generally known, however, it would have added just enough to the already superfluous electricity in that room to make Quaker Hill a beacon to all the surrounding country.

The men followed the ladies into the sitting room almost at once. Mr. Peterson was full of gloomy forebodings as to the future of the world, and such things, after a good dinner, do not go well. It was a hot night with only an occasional puff of breeze. A virginal moon

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lay on her back in a diaphanous sky. Nothing broke the calm silence but the egotistical frogs who were vying with each other to give imitations of irritable footmen blowing whistles for taxicabs.

The women had gone out on to the veranda and were sitting in a semicircle around Mary Miller. Her simplicity and absolute lack of side had already made a favorable impression. Her frankness now in reply to a hundred eager questions won all hearts. Mrs. Peterson beamed with quiet pleasure. Eric was the last out of the dining room and on his way to add his decorative person to the group saw Margaret hovering in the sitting room like a white moth near a lamp with a blood-red shade. She had been waiting for him and beckoned him over.

"Be very good to my friend Mary," she said, with a little quiver in her voice.

Ordinarily Eric would have disguised sincerity beneath a veil of epigrammatic flippancy. It had become a habit. But this time, having rounded the corner that turns from undergrad-

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uatism to manhood and knowing how easily Mary's connection with Margaret's story could have wrecked his happiness, he spoke as he felt. "It shall be the work of my life," he replied, and would have slipped away.

But Margaret laid her hand on his arm. "Stay a moment. I've been in town with my sister since that morning in the studio. I've not had a chance to talk to Mary yet. Tell me what happened."

It was an awkward moment. Eric had had to know the truth about Margaret. It was spreading swiftly through Quaker Hill. With Mrs. Hicks running amuck, the Eleventh Commandment was difficult to keep, it seemed. "Well," he said, treading like a cat on hot bricks, "a good deal has happened. I spoke to Mary that night. She did me the honor to say yes, — as you can see not only by looking at me but because of the party here. Mrs. Mundy's playing the fairy godmother as usual. J. M. Barrie ought to have been her brother. Two mornings later I took Mary home to break the news — and Mrs. Hicks was there."

“ Mrs. Hicks! ”

Eric nodded. “ I don’t know how she had got hold of it, but it was obvious that she had turned up to put things on the blink. Mary beat her in that round but being dead certain that a barrage of 5. nines would lift her chances clean out of the earth if she was n’t in first she came back after dinner to put herself right with my father and mother.”

He had rushed his story up to this point, but now, seeing a look on Margaret’s face which was like that of an animal hunted by dogs, he paused to choose his words. He was infinitely sorry for this unfortunate girl whose one false step seemed to have left an indelible mark. It was not for him to ape the Pharisee.

“ Do *they* know too? ” she asked, in a queer, low voice.

“ Yes,” he said. “ There was no way out. But they have forgotten, Mrs. Meredith, and all they and I are going to remember is your God-sent kindness to Mary. I may say, with everlasting pride, that my father and mother rose to the occasion. Never let anybody tell

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you that old-fashioned people haven't got hearts as well as scruples."

He gave a short laugh and for the first time since his early school days actually blushed. "Forgive this filial enthusiasm," he added, hoping that she would understand that he was also apologizing for an indirect and unmeant criticism of herself.

But Margaret remained as still and as white as Lot's wife after she had been turned into salt. "They know too," she said. "Where will it end?"

Eric was moved to an optimism in which he did not believe. He knew that she was thinking of Bob. "With us," he said. "Don't be afraid. I've got a scheme for the utter removal of the devil's sister and then there'll be peace." He had no scheme, but the impromptu remark planted a seed in his hitherto inactive brain. He owed that mischief-maker something. He would see that it came to her.

"But there's a new danger," said Margaret.

"A new one?"

"Yes. My sister."

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"Your sister! But surely you have n't got an enemy in your sister."

"I have, — more dangerous than Mrs. Hicks. Will you do something for me?"

"Anything."

"Ask Frankie to come and speak to me here."

The boy bowed before that young figure of trouble and stood irresolute. He wanted to say or do something by which he might show how much he was her friend. But his flow of words failed. So he put Margaret's hand to his lips. It was a little clumsily done, — not up to the usual immaculate form of the Flower of Hill.

Once more the white moth hovered alone and despairing in the light of the lamp with the blood-red shade. Sooner or later Bob must know. That was the fear that haunted her by day and night. And that meant for her the tree-surrounded pool at the bottom of the garden and everlasting sleep. Where had been the one wise woman who would have told her without scorn and impatience at the end of

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her school days to clear her head of all the girl rubbish which clogged it then, — the silly stuff that goes with youth, the itch for intrigue and leading one's own life; the fallacy of being "free" — poor foolish word — to taste forbidden fruit, to wander into a sham Eden, to look on marriage vows as easily broken things and the narrow path of duty as dull and out of date?

Frankie Mundy was prepared to lend her sympathetic eye to Margaret that night. She had seen enough in the girl's expression during dinner to know that she stood greatly in need of help. Also she had watched with growing uneasiness the smoke that was rising from the various houses on her beloved Quaker Hill which had been affected by the incendiarism of Mrs. Hicks. Added to which were the whispers brought to her by several little birds. And she had seen Julian driving away from the studio-barn that sunny morning. Something in the nature of hysteria that she had detected about Lilla Bartle, too, had made her ready for an S. O. S. But Margaret, almost alone

among her friends, had not yet come to her confessional. She was allowing her trouble to eat into her soul, and her pride was stubborn. Had something new happened to make her break it down?

She put her arm round Margaret, led her into a window recess and waited, a sweet and gracious woman, tempered into fine steel by her own tragedy, bravely endured.

And at the first sight of those kind, wise eyes Margaret broke down her fourth wall. "Frankie," she whispered, "*I was* with Julian in Baltimore. Mary Miller rescued me and I got off. But the lie was n't buried deep enough. Bits of it have been dug up by Mrs. Hicks, and she is taking it from house to house. Gilbert Carlton and Elsa know. Mr. Mahan knows. Daisy knows. The Petersons know — and there's Bob — oh, God, if he should know. — When I sent Julian away he said that Lilla, who knows too and helped me, might have qualms of conscience. She has, Frankie. They've been coming to her at night and tormenting her. She sent for me to say that she

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could n't look at herself in the glass with the thing on her mind, and I 've brought her back to plead with her not to put herself right at the expense of Bob's happiness. But I can't and the end 's near. I can never let Bob look at me again when his faith has gone."

Frankie held the trembling girl warmly in her arms and soothed her as though she were a child still under the terror of a nightmare. The confession had come at last. Everything that had been suspected was true, with a vengeance! Frankie knew women of Lilla Bartle's type, — high-strung, egotistical, superstitious, without self-control and with an unhealthy and irrepressible itch for standing in the limelight. She despised them. Once having been persuaded into condonation let them stick to their guns, — especially when, as in this case, there was such a man as Bob to be left unshaken.

"The end is nowhere in sight," she said. "There are too many decent people about to prevent that."

"But what can be done? Lilla says that she must speak to Bob to-night."

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"The evening's young yet," said Frankie. "Let me get my thinking cap on, Margaret my dear. Luckily we know something of the temperament of the woman who is the disturbing factor. If we try hard enough we may guess the rest and work accordingly. Sit down and answer one or two questions."

From where they sat close together in that quiet corner the voices of the merry group on the veranda came to them faintly. The scent of the flowers drifted in, and the gentle breeze that had sprung up filled the air with the sound of rustling leaves that was like the applause of fairies. It was a night to make an atheist half believe in God.

"How much older is your sister than you are?"

"Three years, I think, — yes, three years."

"She married at eighteen, did n't she, to a jealous and exacting man?"

"Yes, but Howard's awfully kind really, although he has n't given her any rope."

"Given her any rope, — that's what I wanted to get at. All the precocious notions

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that you girls picked up at school and the wish to enter Blue Rooms and all that that means have been kept under. She has only played a minor part in your — shall I call it adventure? — and is jealous. She would have given her ears to have played the lead. She now sees a way to add another act to this drama of yours in which she can occupy the very center of the stage, and she calls it conscience. I've known women like that before. Being safe, they'll sacrifice anything and anybody to stand in the spot light, and usually there is only one thing to stop them."

"I've tried everything," said Margaret, "and failed."

Frankie held the cold hand a little tighter. "Wait a minute. I have an inspiration. Am I right in supposing that your sister has ever gone in for the Ouija board and palmistry and that kind of thing? Think carefully. It's very important."

Margaret put her hand up to her forehead. It was difficult to concentrate with only one overwhelming idea in her brain. And what on

earth could this have to do with it all? "I don't know," she said. "I don't remember seeing — yes, last year she had her horoscope taken. Howard bought a great big house at Southampton. But she was told that if she went there she would have an accident that would spoil her looks, and so absolutely refused to live in it. Howard was very angry and had to sell the place."

"That's enough," said Frankie, chortling with triumph and excitement. "Then we've got her. You're safe, my dear, — at any rate so far as she's concerned."

"How? I don't understand."

Frankie got up and drew Margaret to her feet. Her face was alight, her eyes sparkling, and there was a wonderful smile playing round her lips. "Come out with me," she said, "and let your load fall from your shoulders. If by the end of half an hour I have n't put the fear of God into Lilla Bartle, I'll eat every one of my collection of hats. This thing is easy. I told you I knew the type."

But on the threshold of the door that led on

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to the veranda Margaret drew up short. She dared not trust herself to the hope that even Frankie Mundy, with all her ingenuity and wit, could save her from an exposure to prevent which she had been using every conceivable plea for several days. It was too good to be true. Why, she had been actually on her knees to Lilla, with tears streaming down her face, and all she had got in return were the reiterated words, "my conscience, — my conscience."

"Frankie," she said, "I don't know how to thank you, but —"

Once more there was the pressure of a firm hand on her soft shoulder and a whisper of complete confidence. "There isn't a but, Margaret. Join the group, be merry and bright and leave the rest to me. I tell you that Bob is not going to watch any imitation of Sara Bernhardt to-night or at any other time from your pent-up sister. That I guarantee."

CHAPTER XIV

AND so they passed out into the scent of flowers and the laughter and the clatter of tongues. The young slip of a moon, lying shyly under the admiring eyes of all the stars, was more golden than before. Frogs were still calling cabs and a little wind was teasing the sleepy leaves. Doris Clayton, in a Mary Pickford attitude, was sitting on the rail of the veranda. One of her shapely legs gleamed whitely. Her frock was fashionably constructed to achieve this pleasant accident.

Margaret took the cane armchair which Eric immediately surrendered to her in his best Grandison manner. It gave him the much desired opportunity to sit on the arm of Mary's and touch her hair surreptitiously with his lips. There is nothing so good in life as being in love. Allen Rumsey had come out of his Martini

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coma and was proving to Mrs. Bartle how easily he could have solved the intricate difficulties of the League of Nations if he were, as he ought to be, President. Bob Meredith threw a quick and tender smile to his wife and went on talking golf to Susan Kester who was an enthusiast without having lost her sense of proportion. The question was one of the overlapping grip, — for and against which whole volumes might be written. The Irishman was astonishing Mrs. Peterson with the old story of his miraculous rise. He knew it by heart but always managed to vary the details.

Frankie went straight over to Nina Hopper whose free access to light and air kept her extremely cool to everybody. Especially Felix, who felt that he had spoken wisely but too well. There was that last half hour before sleep to go through. He had been married several years. She put her hand under Nina's elbow, drew her up and walked her away to the other end of the veranda which was open to the sky.

"Don't ask me why," she said, "but I want

you to turn Allen Rumsey out of his seat at once and talk palmistry to Lilla Bartle."

Nina puckered her dark eyebrows. "Palmistry," she echoed.

"Yes, coupled with my name. Get in as quickly and as deftly as you can that I am perhaps the most wonderful exponent of the science of reading hands in the country."

"Are you, Frankie?"

"No, my love, but you will say so and add that you yourself have lately been guided through a very delicate matter by what I told you and that sometimes, under great pressure, I can be persuaded to treat people who are not on the most intimate terms with me. Be mysterious and enthusiastic and hint at occult powers. I want Mrs. Bartle to consult me—I think that's the word—within ten minutes. I shall be in the den to the left of the hall."

"What's the idea?" asked Nina bluntly.

Frankie faced the girl with the indiscreet frock with sudden gravity. "I want to save a poor dear friend of mine from suicide," she said.

Nina nearly jumped out of her exposed skin.

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“ Good Heavens, but suppose I can’t get Mrs. Bartle interested? ”

“ Then you won’t be the girl I take you to be. Look. Allen’s on his feet. Now’s your chance.” She watched Nina go swiftly back and slip into the vacant chair. Then she went into the house, gave an admirable order as to Scotch whiskey, of which she had laid in a number of cases in an endeavor to mitigate a law specially designed to undermine the self-control of the country and render it the laughingstock of the world, and went into the den which had belonged to the man who could never come back. In this intimate and comfortable room, lined with books and hung with sporting trophies, she waited with confidence and patience with her hand on the telephone. She must do something to convey the impression of having left her guests for a reason.

She was beginning to wonder whether Nina had let her down or she herself had over-estimated Mrs. Bartle’s fund of superstition, when there was a quick step in the hall. She pushed the telephone away, turned towards the door

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and saw Margaret's sister standing there irresolutely. The light was strong enough to show a rather pretty young woman with a mass of loosely done brown hair, a somewhat petulant mouth and brown eyes which had a disconcerting way of watching the lips of the person to whom she was speaking. She conveyed the suggestion of repressed flightiness and she wore clothes which had evidently been bought in one mood and altered in another. All about her, in short, there was instability, sentimentality, indecision and a wish to suggest something about which she was unable to make up her mind. A tantalizing person.

"Oh," she said, "I hope I'm not — that is, Mrs. Hopper has just been telling me — of course I can't claim to be among your intimate friends but —" She gave a nervous laugh and held out her hand impulsively. "Will you, *please*? It would be so kind."

Frankie raised her eyebrows and pretended to misunderstand. She did that sort of thing like a true woman of the world. "You're not going yet?" she asked. "It's very early."

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"No, no. It's a perfectly wonderful party and I shall never be able to tear myself away. What I mean is, if I might ask you, just for this once, it would be so greatly appreciated, to look at my hand."

Mrs. Mundy smiled and shook her head. "I'm afraid not," she answered. "Not to-night. Some other time, perhaps, quietly, when no one is here. But, dear me, it's very interesting, very unusual." She let her eyes fall on the open palm and remain there as though impelled by a strong desire to examine the lines.

"Is it? Is it really? Oh, if only — just this once — There is something that is troubling me very much. I feel that you —"

But Frankie, imitating the rapt gaze of the professional charlatans whose methods she had watched, seemed to hear nothing. Something in the hand had arrested her and absorbed her whole attention. "This needs a stronger light," she said suddenly, after a long moment of minute examination. She drew the willing and curious girl to the table on which the lamp

stood. The shade was tilted and the full glare fell upon the outstretched palm whose thumb showed sensuality and fingers the artistic temperament. And for a minute there was an utter silence, broken only by the busy ticking of a bland-faced clock.

Then Frankie did a thing that she had seen work wonders twice, — once at the Allied Bazaar, and once in the “studio” of a woman in New York whose waiting list was as long as that of a fashionable golf club. “You must excuse me,” she said abruptly. “I don’t think I’d better, after all.” She went back several steps and put on an expression of enigmatical gravity. It was perfectly done.

And of course it had the desired effect. Lilla Bartle was thrilled. “Oh, please go on,” she cried eagerly. “Whatever it is, you can’t possibly leave me now. Oh, please, Mrs. Mundy.”

Still with her almost unwilling gaze on the criss-crossed palm, Frankie hesitated and muttered something to herself about the risk. Then once more she held the fingers under

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the light, probing, examining, deciphering. "Very extraordinary," she said at last. "Very extraordinary. I've only seen this once since this gift was given to me.—The woman poisoned herself."

Lilla Bartle was frightfully impressed, inordinately stirred. Her warped vanity swelled visibly. Here was limelight indeed. "What — what do you see?" she asked in a low voice.

"Evidences of great mental anguish," said Frankie. "The heart line and the head line are connected by one which only comes when the conscience is undergoing exquisite agony."

"Oh," sighed Lilla, bending lower, "go on, please; please go on."

"I see that you intend to take a step that will lead you to bitter and lifelong regret and remorse, a cruel and a disloyal step, involving the death of one person and the lifelong misery of another. If you take it —"

She got no further. The hand was snatched away. An odd laugh rang through the room, and when Frankie looked up, convinced that she had allowed herself to be carried away she saw,

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as she expected, a cunning smile on the face of the woman whom she had hoped to terrorize.

"What is it?" she asked.

"I see, Margaret has been talking to you," scoffed Mrs. Bartle. "Anybody could do palmistry like that!"

If some one had cut her across her bare shoulders with a whip Frankie could not have been more staggered and nonplussed. She had made the mistake of talking too plainly, of working too fast, of not surrounding her interpretation with mysterious innuendos. This girl was not such a fool as she looked. Would there have to be a meal of hats, after all? Was the guarantee to Margaret to be worthless and futile? Not if she knew it.

"Of course Margaret has been talking to me," she said, with only the briefest hesitation. "And I've been looking at you with wonder and amazement. You didn't seem to be the sort of woman who, to plunge into an orgy of self-indulgence, could give her sister away to the man whose belief in her is the most beautiful thing I know. But neither you nor she

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nor any other living person can tell the outcome of this abominable piece of treachery except me, — because it is written in your hand. Give it to me again. I insist — I say that I insist.”

This time it was she who held out her hand, and her attitude was so imperious, her voice so filled with ominous strength and the look in her eyes so spiritual that the superstitious girl wavered only for a few seconds. Nina had hinted that Mrs. Mundy was occult. She well might be with her white hair and young face and eyes that had cried all her tears away. The hand fluttered up, trembling.

Frankie waved it aside. “I don’t need your lines,” she said. “*You* are what I need, — you and your aura. It is black with streaks of yellow, — black for death and yellow for jealousy. Margaret has been the victim of uncorrected youth and selfishness, and you envy her the tragic rôle. You see your way to assume it without payment, and your loyalty is so negligible that you are willing to sacrifice your sister to satisfy your vanity. Very well, do so, but be prepared for the ven-

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geance of the spirits of all dead women, among whom your sister will be numbered. That line on your hand, almost indiscernible, means a gravestone, the eternal heartbreak of a man and the lonely cries of a motherless boy."

"Oh, my God!" cried Lilla Bartle, white and shaking. "What can I do to rub the line out. Tell me!"

Frankie drew in a long breath and withdrew her pointing finger. Her knees trembled a little with the effort that she had made and a curious sense of tiredness crept all over her. She defined friendship as something more than the reciprocation of kind offices. And once more the leaves made a rustle that was like the applause of fairies.

"Go down on your knees in this room, now, at once, and register a promise at the feet of God to stand by the woman who is made of the same flesh and blood. That is your only chance."

She left the den and slipped away, tired, triumphant and a little ashamed. She knew the Bartle type well enough to be certain that she

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had frightened that side of her permanently which believed in the direct agency of superior beings in extraordinary events. And her hats were safe.

A few minutes later the silver dress with its glinting sequins caught Margaret's anxious eyes, an affectionate hand touched her shoulder and the words that she had prayed to hear were whispered in her ear. "You are safe, my dear."

The load fell, — but when the woman whose lie refused to be buried glanced at the man of great and wonderful faith, two other words framed themselves in her mind. "How long?"

CHAPTER XV

ON the veranda of the Country Club, on week-day afternoons, sit the arbiters of Quaker Hill, — those who have it in their power to judge and determine the differences and the destinies of all the other residents of that charming and well-kept corner of Connecticut.

It goes without saying that these controllers, appointed by Heaven to their high and dangerous office by reason of their sex and leisure, are the wives of the men who disappear between seven and eight and return between six and seven. Limited in their discussions by no hard and fast rules, or by any unwritten laws which can put a brake upon their tongues, the members of the committee having duly gone over everybody else never hesitate to criticize those of their sister judges who do not happen to be present. And so, under all circumstances,

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there is no lack of enjoyable topics and little chance of boredom.

When wife meets wife then comes the need of prayer.

It was on a sunny afternoon in the time of June when lilac is over but syringa is at its best that Nina Hopper, Frankie Mundy, Susan Kester, Olive Rumsey and Marjorie Holbrook were gathered together to discuss a piece of news which seemed to be fraught with wider importance than either the international epidemic of strikes or the effect of the financial disruption of Europe upon the future of the United States. A telephone message from Mrs. Hicks, whose attack of neuralgia luckily kept her at home, had told them that Julian and Daisy Osborn had given up their rooms at the Ritz Hotel and had come back to their delightful house on Woodside Drive. It had been taken by Marjorie Holbrook and duly delivered by her to every one of the white-clad group. There had followed a moment of pulsating silence.

A clear and persistent sun glorified the un-

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dulating and deserted golf course, bunkered almost beyond perfection. A duck-clad manservant at the far end of the shady veranda eyed the distant Sound, thinking of fish. A fat robin on the eighteenth green listened parentally for worms, and an invisible Stutz, with an open throttle, gave an ever-lessening imitation of catarrh.

Nina Hopper was the first to recover.

"I don't believe it," she said in her downright way.

"It does n't seem possible," said Mrs. Rumsey, bringing a new diamond-studded wrist watch a little further into view.

Marjorie Holbrook had had so many surprises that she had come to believe that it is the improbable that always happens. "Two children in two years leaves a woman incapable of scepticism about anything," she said, "even this."

"Well, I shall have to see them here," said Susan Kester, deliciously and almost boyishly slim and dressed with particular care in a mushroom straw hat, blue sweater with the long

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pointed ends of a low-cut shirt, a white skirt, black stockings and brown brogues with lopping tongues.

And then they all turned expectant eyes upon Frankie Mundy. In a perfectly new fillet sweater of canary colored wool, which she knew very well would be imitated by every one of her friends before the end of the week, Mrs. Mundy had been enjoying the brief thrill of appearing in something that stirred envy in every heart. The broad yellow band round her black straw hat had also done its work. She was, therefore, in a particularly triumphant mood.

"My dears," she said genially, "you forget that Mrs. Hicks, who has a bird's-eye view of the Osborn house from her sleeping porch, has been lying on her bed watching the return of the newly remarried couple through binoculars."

There was a general gurgle of laughter. This quickly drawn picture was elaborated at once by the imagination of each of the four girls. In their mind's eye they saw the hard-

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bosomed Mrs. Hicks with curlers gleaming in her peroxide hair, sitting solidly against a mass of pillows, watching every movement of Julian and Daisy with the aid of Wilbur's racing glasses. Fate in a beribboned nightie, — it was irresistible.

It was Susan Kester who brought the arbiters back to seriousness. "I wonder they are n't afraid of what people will say," she said, "I should be."

"So should I. Divorced six weeks ago, remarried at once and fully aware that everybody knows of Julian's side-step, — coming back home without even the decent proverbial year to make things easier for us! People will say a good deal, — much as the Osborns are liked."

"I'm afraid you're right, Olive," said Marjorie.

"I know it," said Nina Hopper, sitting bolt upright in her cane chair with everything about her — hair, eyes, teeth, finger nails, clothes and shoes — looking as though they had just come home from the wash. "By to-night it will be

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all over Quaker Hill, and the great question will be shall we call or what? I don't think even the Osborns have the right to make things so difficult. To my mind it shows an amount of callousness that reflects on the whole community."

There was a pause during which it was hoped that Frankie would speak. But she said nothing and went on rocking, — a cool and gracious figure.

And so Marjorie returned to the charge, not dogmatically, for that was not in her equable nature, but putting a very clear and alarming thought in the form of a question. "Of course we know that they're married and all that, which is something. But the point is, has n't Daisy given a black eye to all the rest of us by taking a husband back after he has run off the rails?"

"Exactly," said Olive. "Think of the feeling of carelessness it will give to all *our* husbands, — and goodness knows we have all we can do as it is to keep a line on them."

Nina gave one of her short laughs. "Can

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you see me calling Felix home after an aberration of that sort?"

"It's a question of ethics," said Mrs. Kester. "I think they ought to have gone right away for at least a year. There would have been no difficulty in letting the house,—and we needn't have known the people who took it. In a place like this, where so many of you are more or less newly married, the moral laws must be jealously guarded. At least, so it seems to me."

"Yes, indeed," said Marjorie, thinking of those two chubby babies.

And once again, by mutual agreement, an opportunity was given to Frankie to state her opinion. But still she held her peace and continued to rock.

So Nina Hopper, who knew that their course of action, whatever their opinions were, would be, as usual, influenced by Mrs. Mundy, turned directly to her.

"It's no good our talking," she said. "Tell us what *you* think, Frankie."

A woman of ordinary vanity would have per-

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mitted herself to indulge in a momentary glow of conceit at being appealed to in this way. Not so Frankie. She regretted her youth and envied it in the young women who sat round her. How infinitely glad she would have been if she, like them, were in the first swim of things, well on the sunny side of thirty, with all her illusions and delusions, and, being very young, able to make sweeping assertions and uncharitable judgments to her heart's content. It was a time that so quickly slipped away. Being a prophet at thirty-five was not compensation enough.

“Dear Nina,” she said, feeling every one of her summers for once, “we have all got to make up our minds to one of two inevitable courses, — either to be ruled by what people will say and go about in a perpetual state of self-consciousness, or dree our own weird and let people say what they like and choke. Personally I admire the moral courage of Julian and Daisy in coming back so soon. Probably they said to themselves in that stiff little sitting room high up in the Ritz with the hideous reek of

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gasoline rising to their windows, ' Let the damn people talk. We 've got a perfectly nice house eating its head off, with all our flower gardens wondering what 's become of us. Let 's go back and enjoy it at the best time of year, and if people who called themselves our friends and sat at our table are going to climb up on to moral stilts, — well, let 'em. There may be one or two who don't think that Christianity consists merely in going to church and leaving human tolerance behind them in their pews, — and these will rally round. After all, it's our life, and we can only live it once, whatever people will say.' I am going to be one of the first to welcome them back because I think that Daisy did a very fine and very splendid thing in forgiving Julian. — Them 's my sentiments, my dears, with many apologies."

After which there seemed very little to say. Not one of those girls who had given out sentiments which were diametrically opposite to those of Frankie felt herself to be snubbed or laid low and walked over. Frankie's position in that community had been won by consistent

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cheeriness, a sort of humble confidence in herself and humanity, and by a very honest desire to place the outcome of much suffering and many sleepless nights at the disposal of her young friends. . Once more, therefore, without chagrin, her verdict was accepted. Julian and Daisy should be met on the same footing as was theirs before the divorce took place, and if, at any time, derogatory remarks of the kind to which they themselves had just given voice should be made in their hearing, they would repeat what Frankie said as nearly as possible word for word.

Quaker Hill had its library and its inevitable statue to the brave men who fell in the Civil War. If it were to put up also, in one of its most charming open spaces, near a bevy of fine old trees, a little mark of its esteem to Frankie Mundy, it would have to be designed by a sculptor who had lost a precious wife in order that it should embody the very spirit of womanhood.

“Before we dismiss the subject let’s map out a little programme. Shall we? The first

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thing to do is for me to get on the telephone to Margaret."

"Is n't that a little daring?" asked Nina.

"No," said Frankie, "why should it be?" But she wondered how much Nina Hopper knew. "She and Bob are obviously the first people who must give the glad hand to Julian and Daisy, and they must do so to-night as soon as Bob gets back. To-morrow morning, having given Daisy time to unpack her things, I will drop in. Then I think Marjorie and Olive might stroll round after lunch to be joined by the rest of you for tea. Luckily Mrs. Hicks is down with neuralgia. I hope it will keep her down for several blessed days, — but I doubt it. Then in about three or four days' time we'll give a dinner to them, but all in a sort of accidental way and without any suggestion of a preconceived idea. After that everything will go smoothly, and Julian and Daisy will be able to carry on as though nothing whatever had happened. How's that?"

There was a chorus of "Fine!" a general feeling of benevolence which is well worth

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achieving and a movement to a bridge table. The rest of the afternoon was spent by these charming arbiters in trying to win money from each other at a quarter of a cent a point, while Olive, who never played cards, pored over the pages of her Bible which was, of course, bound up in the decorative covers of *Vogue*. Poor dear Olive had lately taken on about thirty-six entirely superfluous pounds. It suited her. She had been intended for opulence, — but her ever present problem was how to get into the narrow and skimpy garments of the disembodied spirits who stood on one listless leg in a mere handful of material, not in dozens but in hundreds throughout the columns of that marvellous paper which covers the lives of so many women with the glamour of the impossible. The others need not have concerned themselves in the least as to the prospect of Olive's being bored, while they enjoyed rubber after rubber, because having gone meticulously through the main body of the magazine there remained, of course, the wad of advertising pages at each end of it. Among these, which become monthly

more and more adventurous and pay less and less attention to good taste and to the possible diatribes of those Chicago clergymen who are highly concerned about the morals of the stage, Olive procured all the necessary thrills, surprises, amazements and shortnesses of breath. There is no need for any one to subscribe to *La Petite Parisienne* when *Vogue* is at hand. It takes the wind out of everything French.

CHAPTER XVI

IN the meantime Margaret Meredith had been called up by Mrs. Hicks and informed of the return of Julian and Daisy. "My dear," Mrs. Hicks had said, clinging to her binoculars with one hand, "what do you think? I hear that the Osborn house is open again and that Julian and Daisy are at this very moment watching their trunks being taken off the express truck. I wish I could see how they look, and I wonder how they're going to feel when Quaker Hill gives them the cold shoulder. I thought you'd like to know this little piece of news."

Margaret had dropped the telephone. Julian—Julian, back again,—and every night, do what she could, he slipped into her dreams,

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and every day, however busy she kept herself and however sternly she thrust him from her thoughts, he followed her from room to room, even into the nursery of her little son and the den in which Bob pored over his work at night, knocking out his pipe with the old familiar sound. What was she to do?

The night of her return to Bob was only six weeks old. But during that short period of time she had renewed almost hourly her prayer to God to help her forget the man who had carried her off her feet. There had been times when she had thought, with the blessed optimism without which life would be impossible, that she was succeeding in her great task, and if anything could have helped her even more tangibly than prayer it was Bob's love and tenderness and the fact that she was supreme in the life of the little boy who would hardly ever let her out of his sight. There had been moments, too, when the echo of Julian's laugh had shaken her from head to foot and some half-forgotten exclamation of his had floated through her mind and sent the blood

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tingling to her cheeks. Under her constant fear of discovery and her knowledge, so often renewed, that Mrs. Hicks held the sword of Damocles over her head, it was a wonder that she could keep a smiling and apparently unconcerned face for Bob when he came back from the city. Her one great hope was that she should not ever see Julian, and this had been made stronger from the fact that the brief sight of him in Mary Miller's studio had forced her to begin all over again. And now he was coming back to live within a stone's throw of her house, to be seen by her daily, to be met by her almost every night in one or other of the houses in which the community foregathered. How could she go through with it? And, above all, how would she be able to catch the eyes of her old friend Daisy who knew her secret, — if it could be called a secret, when its head was popping up in so many places?

The gleeful voice of Mrs. Hicks, that female devil whose one joy in life seemed to be to dog her heels, put back into her brain again the sight of that little pond at the bottom of the garden

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which the ingenuity and the loyalty of Frankie had momentarily put out of it. She stood in the telephone room to the left of her hall and gazed at the instrument with the eyes of a hunted animal. She had flown in the face of moral laws and social codes, being young and thoughtless, and had been, it seemed to her, already sufficiently punished. But it appeared that Fate still had it in for her. "I don't think I can go through with it," she said to herself. "I don't think I can."

Among Peroxide Anna's other telephone calls was one to Wilbur. The complete mischief-maker had known that her little husband would be pretty certain to come down in the club car with Bob and so she had broken the great news to him in order that he should spread it widely.

The first thing that Bob said, therefore, when he met Margaret on the steps of his house was, "What do you think? Julian and Daisy are home again!"

"Yes, I know," said Margaret.

"Have you been around to see them yet?"

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She shook her head, dreading to hear what she knew was already shaping itself in Bob's mind.

"Let's get dinner over as quick as possible and look them up. I want to be the first to say 'Welcome back' to them,—not because of what people will say or any rot of that sort, but for every other reason. Daisy's your oldest pal, and Julian and I have been like David and Jonathan, and by Jove, it's good to think that after their bad trouble they've come back as though nothing had happened. What do you say?"

Margaret smiled and laid her hand on Meredith's arm. "Anything that you say goes, Bob," she said. "You're the most generous man in the world."

"And you're,—well, you're just Margaret," and he kissed her and dashed upstairs to change, whistling like a boy. And during this process young Bob was placed on the window seat in the light of the evening sun and given his chance to open up to his father on all the grave and serious questions of his day.

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These included many involved details of Indian stuff.

Finally, while dinner was kept waiting about ten minutes, Margaret watched these two boys play at bears in the room of the younger of the two, — a game which would have given great delight to H. G. Wells, the master of the child mind.

Wise in his generation, Bob Meredith had always made a point of treating his wife as a woman of intelligence, not merely as a pretty doll whose brain was unable to assimilate anything but the mere skim of things. And during dinner, as was his habit, he discussed with her the various problems of his business, relying on her intuition to give him pointers and on her caution to prevent him from entering into hazardous speculation or into trusting every one who came to him with gold bricks simply because they happened to wear the right sort of tie and speak the same language.

This was part of a well-thought-out plan which Bob had formulated during the several months of his engagement to Margaret. His

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father and mother, although they never had an open breach, did not seem to him to have solved the vital problem of how to be happy though married. His other near relations, uncles and aunts, had all of them been on terms of scrapiness. Little fights would flare up at odd moments and he noticed at family reunions that wives and husbands told stories against each other with laughter on their lips but nothing of mirth in their eyes. These things had stuck.

And so, having given the matter much profound thought and come to the conclusion that the happiness of a married couple mainly depended upon the man, Bob laid down a few subtle rules for himself which he kept most carefully locked in the innermost recesses of his brain. For instance, if he got up with a grouch, probably because his digestion was not in perfect order, he did n't pay out his wife for it by irritation at the breakfast table. He saved it until he got to his office and let it go on his clerks. It had, of course, to come out. He made a point also not only of noticing his wife's new clothes but in never failing to comment

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upon them most favorably, whether he liked them or not. He always noticed that if he did n't like them they very soon disappeared to blush out again, probably the following Sunday, on the muscular back of an Irish maidservant. Somehow or other Margaret sensed that they were wrong without having to undergo the humiliation of being told so. Then too, although he rather loathed the theater and had no use whatever for Midnight Frolics where giggling, insipid girls bleat songs in streams of limelight, he made a point of taking Margaret to these places at least once a week so that she should not imagine that an unbroken round of country life was rendering her bovine. Also he brought down to her the new novels of all the men who counted, and which he himself never read, and copies of those little pompous weeklies which play at socialism with kid gloves, deal with politics in the manner of precocious undergraduates and treat books and plays with a snigger of self-conscious joy and a fundamental incapacity for showing humor about

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anything. He hoped that she would never read them but he knew that she liked to have them about to give her boudoir that air of peculiar intellectuality which these things try so hard to achieve.

All these small laws were characteristic of the man and his desperate desire to spread the first happiness of his honeymoon over into his married life, and by every subtle and sympathetic scheme that he could devise prevent it from drifting into the cat and dog state which had prevailed under his father's roof and those of his relations. It may be said that on no account whatever would he confide his naïve but admirable ideas even to his closest friend. He knew that he would be held up to ridicule. He salved his own conscience with this argument. In order to keep up a good game of golf he had spent whole days practising short approaches, mashie strokes, drives and putts. He had studied the works of Braid and other masters, and taken the Royal and Ancient with all the seriousness that it deserved. It was a difficult game, an amazingly fine game, full of science

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and greatly dependent upon the state of nerves. But it was neither so difficult, so fine nor so scientific as the game of marriage. Why, therefore, should n't he practise all the points of the latter as earnestly and as often as all the strokes of the former?

The scoffing answer to all this is obviously to point to Margaret and to ask, "What about this unhappy woman, her thoughts filled with another man, forcing herself into the mere imitation of domestic felicity?" But that is an unfair question because before and since meeting Julian, Margaret had nothing whatever against Bob. He had her respect, esteem and admiration and in reality her love. Her aberration in regard to Julian was the outcome of an undisciplined girlhood and a school training which had everything else in it except the one real thing, — the courage to be serious.

And so the meal passed as though it were the dinner of lovers and not of people who had been married for some years. Both Bob and his wife were still on their best behavior, metaphorically in parade kit, and there was none of that

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back-answer business, the lack of politeness, humor and sympathy, or the general slipshodness which so many people permit themselves to fall into as soon as the first flush of surprise at new conditions has slipped into the limbo of forgotten things.

"I'll just go and see whether the boy's asleep," said Margaret. "Shall I wear a hat?"

"Yes, no," said Bob. "Just as you like. Why wear a hat with hair like that?" And he laughed and kissed her again and watched her go upstairs, his mind utterly untainted even with the most remote suspicion that Margaret was not so happy as she appeared to be. He loaded his pipe and went whistling out on to the veranda to feed his eyes on the color that was all about his well-kept garden and look forward with the keenest pleasure to the sight of his old pal Julian again, who had, to his way of thinking, retrieved his sportsmanship by having asked for Daisy's forgiveness and put it up to her to come back to him. He knew that to

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a man of Julian's character the act of apologizing was a pretty large order.

Poor old Bob! What a shock would have been his could he have seen Margaret's expression at that moment as she stood over the bed of her little boy with her eyes shut, her hands clasped together, her white face turned upwards and a prayer in her heart that she might go through this new torture in a way which would leave Bob happy and undisturbed. Good God, how we play the fool, we marionettes.

CHAPTER XVII

PRESENTLY, hand in hand, these two went down on to one of the spotless side roads for which Quaker Hill is celebrated and made their way to the house which Daisy Osborn had looked upon as Paradise. It was hidden from the road by a thick screen of trees and shrubs and, like most of the other houses in that place, was cocked up on high boulders of rock which were for the most part covered with rambling roses just about to burst into bloom. They climbed up to it by the back way, coming on to smooth lawns with beds of flowers that were all alive with color. Through the long window of the dining room they saw Julian and Daisy seated at opposite ends of a table which at one time had dominated the refectory of a nunnery within a stone's throw of

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Cadenabbia. They saw Julian spring to his feet and wave his hand.

Daisy sat rigid, her young profile cameo-like, her elbows pressed tightly to her sides. One look at her told Margaret that although Julian was forgiven she was not and probably would never be. With this she sympathized because she understood, — but it did not make the prospect of the next hour any the less awful.

Julian caught his wife's quick intake of breath and smothered exclamation. With his back to her he continued to wave and show his teeth, but his whisper of "Play up, darling, prove once more how big and fine you are," was urgent. During his appeal to Daisy to face the tongues of Quaker Hill and return to their comfortable house he had mentally acted this very scene. He had the imagination and the sensitiveness of those who undergo the agony of attending a funeral the day before it takes place, or the nervous strain of the preliminaries of an operation before being placed upon the table. He had seen himself shiver and go white to the lips when the girl whose beauty had

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so nearly wrecked his life came into it again with Bob and Daisy present. He was immediately overjoyed to discover that at the actual sight of her the old thrill and tingle failed to run through his body. A little appalled and perhaps disappointed too, because it showed how easily a man forgets. What had seemed to be a matter of life and death a few weeks before was already a memory. The fire of that passionate interlude had burned itself out and even the charred remains were almost covered with the greenery of domestic health.

But there was one most horrible act to be performed at the beginning of this apparently joyful reunion of four old friends. Julian knew that he was about to give Bob Meredith the hand of Judas. The seduction of Margaret shrank into even a smaller matter than it had become in his mind when compared with the remembrance of his disloyalty to a man to whom he had been closer than a brother. It would have been less painful to Julian to have met Meredith as an enemy.

In this meeting there was, however, some-

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thing to Julian and the two wives which lifted it high above the element of mere personal discomfort. This was the knowledge shared by all three that Bob alone knew nothing of the difficulty and the inherent drama of it all, and for his sake this made them equally anxious to strain every nerve to play their parts with courage.

With Daisy at his elbow Julian stood on the porch while the others came strolling up over the lawn.

"It's a slice of Hell," he said to himself, "and I deserve it."

Going swiftly to Daisy, Bob bent down and kissed her cheek. "Welcome home, my dear, — and the same to you, old son." His grip was like that of steel.

Luckily for the two girls, Bob's back was facing Julian as they met. There was a mutual stammer of conventional words. No handshake, no embrace. A sudden silence.

For the rest Julian sang out, "How are you, Margaret, — how nice the place looks, eh?"

And it was over.

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The reaction from that queer emotional moment took them all characteristically. Bob hauled out his inevitable pipe and loaded it. "How 's business, Julian?" he asked, clearing his throat.

Osborn made a graceful dive into the sun-parlor and brought out two chairs noisily. Action for him. "Fine," he said, "things look good and my partners are back."

Margaret sat down. Her knees were trembling. But as usual when under any sort of strain she ran a finger over and over her diamond pin. "Aren't the pansies big this year?" she said.

Daisy deliberately re-powdered her nose and went through that cold-blooded performance, so amusing to her friends, of adding color to lips already red enough. It was a trick of nerves invariably carried out even in the most public places. She had been known to do it in an opera box, when all the lights came on after the first act; in church at the happy conclusion of the sermon; in a Fifth Avenue bus when it had just missed crashing with an army truck.

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There were those who betted that she had indulged in the process at the altar steps after Julian had slipped the ring upon her finger. It did no good to tell her that this hastily applied make-up added momentarily several years to her appearance and jerked her from her own plane of good breeding down to that of the chorus. It had become as much a habit as eating. So there it was.

She took the other chair. "Put these in your pocket for me, Julian," she said, and handed over a bunch of golden dinks which were attached to the same chain. "And now come and sit down, you two. It makes me restless to see people standing about."

It was like old times. But before Julian could carry out orders and with a return to something like normal feelings settle down to a general conversation, his arm was taken.

"If you'll excuse us for half an hour," said Bob, who was very happy, "I'm going to walk Julian about the garden. A bit of exercise after dinner."

And as the two men fell in step and marched

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off together like brothers, they left behind them a most uncomfortable silence.

The light had almost gone. One or two birds less sleepy than the rest were piping long arias to their mates, shattering the quietude which was settling on the earth. Fireflies had begun to come out and their little lights were flicking fantastically against the dark background of the woods. The warm air was flavored with the scent of new-cut grass.

At last Daisy spoke. "How is your boy?" she asked, in the voice she would have used to a woman staying in the same summer hotel.

Margaret pulled herself together. "Splendid," she said, "growing visibly and using the most extraordinary words."

"Really?"

"Yes. Already he's half a size bigger than the clothes made for his age."

"Is n't that wonderful?"

"Yes. He made us laugh the other day. He said —"

And away went the fond mother into anecdotes of the little soul who was, of course, the

eighth wonder of the world. Forcing a laugh at the right place or an interjection when she thought it was suitable, Daisy watched the girl who had been her dearest friend, but who had, as she put it to herself in thinking things over since taking Julian back, tempted her husband. If she had dared to look at this thing with dead honesty, it would have been utterly impossible for her to have permitted Margaret within a hundred miles. In addition to this wise piece of mental camouflage she then added to herself, in order to strengthen her position, that Margaret's beauty was greater than ever and that she was undoubtedly very alluring and dangerous. "Poor Julian," she thought, "it was not his fault."

And while she expatiated on the wit and ingenuity of Bob Junior, unutterably grateful to him for providing her with a means for breaking that appalling silence, Margaret ran a new thought to earth. Daisy had not and could not forgive. That was obvious and natural. She might, therefore, if something were not done at once to touch her sympathy, range

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herself with Mrs. Hicks and presently set to work to shatter Bob's false paradise by way of revenge. Why not? She was as human as the rest of people, and once before at school she had shown herself capable of a startling piece of cruelty. And so it seemed to Margaret that she must at once do two things. First, immediately to take the sting out of the mischief-maker's next story; second, to humiliate herself to the extent of letting her friend see something of her desperation and to try and claim the memory of her friendship.

With a quick action she drew her chair nearer and changed the conversation abruptly. "We've broken the ice," she said. "Now let's talk about things that matter."

"For instance?" asked Daisy on her guard.

"Julian and me."

Her back stiffened. "I should have thought that anything else would be better to discuss than that."

"No," said Margaret, bending forward eagerly, "and I'll tell you why. I want to discount something that is certain to be brought

to you within the next twenty-four hours. May I?"

"I suppose so."

"Well then, the other day Julian came down to see me without a word to you."

"Julian, —"

"Yes. There were urgent reasons. Gilbert Carlton's engagement to Elsa Mahan, — you know of that?"

"I met her in town. She told me."

"Was on the verge of being stopped because of Gilbert's friendship with Mary Miller, — whose name you will remember."

"Yes, I remember." She made that plain.

"At the same time Eric Peterson had made up his mind to ask Mary to be his wife, and I had to be dragged into it all to clear Mary's name and yet to try to keep my story out of it. I can't go into any of the details of my fear and terror, — I have n't the descriptive powers. I just want you to know that in a frantic moment and under the instinct of self-preservation I called up Julian and begged him to come and help me, and he came and we met in Mary's

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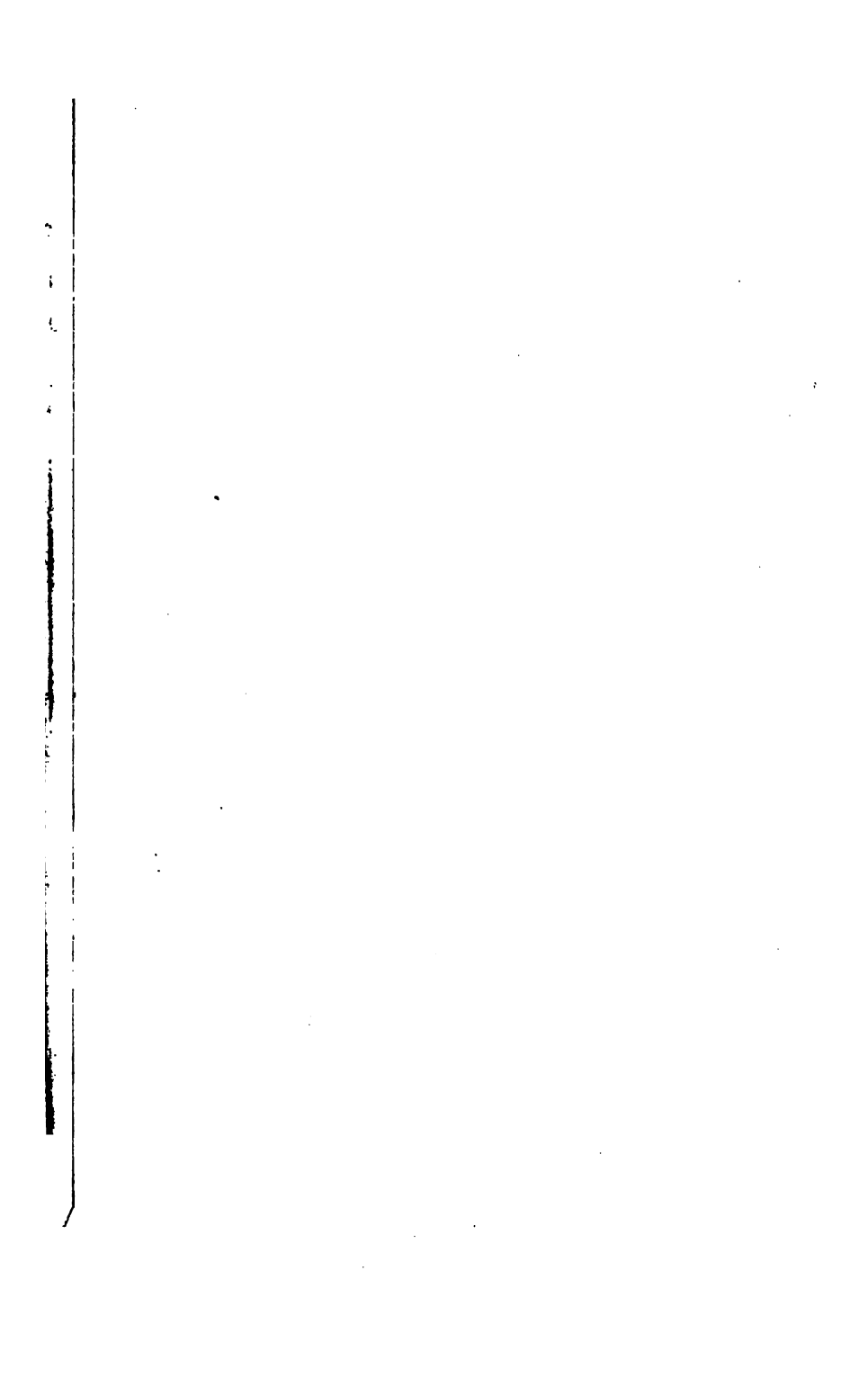
studio for a few minutes but were not able to help in any way and the discovery has only been put off for a time. That's the truth, and when the story's brought to you, probably by Mrs. Hicks, you may dismiss it utterly from your mind."

"Thank you," said Daisy. "I'm glad you told me." She gave no help and made no effort to meet Margaret half way. She sat very upright, looking amazingly young and unrelenting.

And having got that over Margaret started again. "Daisy," she said, her voice breaking, "I know exactly how you feel. I don't think that you're hard with me. I think you're merely just. I still love Julian, I can't help it, but I shall continue to put up a tremendous fight to live it down, and if you can find it in your heart never to pay me out — never to undermine Bob's faith in me — for the sake of what we used to be to each other, I think I shall be able to win out. The whole thing was n't Julian's fault. It was mine. He never really cared two cents about me and



Weeping and on her knees,—that was how a stealer of husbands should be. *Page 231.*



never gives a thought to me now. I know that and am thankful." She stretched out her hand. "Will you swear to me, — will you give me your absolute promise . . . "

She could get no further. A sudden rush of tears smashed her voice to pieces and she went down on her knees in front of her once best friend with her hands clasped together, — sobbing and afraid to touch. She was a most pitiable figure of supplication.

The knowledge of her power filled Daisy with a sort of primeval satisfaction. Weeping and on her knees, — that was how a stealer of husbands should be. She had let her off once before, and for the same reason she would let her off again. All the same it was right and just that she should suffer. For the wrong-doer punishment is good. Let her weep then and wring her hands —

But a new shutter opened suddenly in Daisy's brain, and through it she saw something that shook her out of cruelty and carried her to her feet.

"Oh, Margaret," she whispered, "don't,

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don't! Get up, quick. I can't stand seeing you there. Something has just come to me that alters everything and makes me humble too."

"What is it?" asked Margaret, stumbling to her feet. What was the next surprise?

"Julian was not good to me for a long time before all this happened and I used to wish I were dead. But since the night that he came back with you he has been just as he was when we were on our honeymoon, — *and I owe that to you, Margaret, to you!* I'll be your friend again and keep your secret. I will. I will."

Once more the abyss receded from Margaret's feet. Once more the danger mark was passed. But as she felt Daisy's arms round her and her lips against her cheek, the hurt of the fact that Julian was "just as he was" agonized her soul.

When the men came back they saw their wives sitting hand in hand touched by the soft light that came through the window of the sitting room.

"God," asked Julian inwardly, "is there anything more unexpected than a woman?"

CHAPTER XVIII

It was not required of a man that he should be endowed with any special gift of psychology to tell, after one glance at Bob Meredith, that the day was Saturday and the weather ripe for golf. The 1:03 express from the Grand Central had brought him to Quaker Hill, with the other men of the community, tingling with the "let-out" feeling of schoolboys which makes the weekend of all healthy commuters the most precious hours in their possession.

Heading a small fleet of cars which, having overcome that disgraceful stretch of switchback round the depot, made small work of the two miles of perfect road that lay between the neat town and the opulent Country Club, Bob dashed whistling into the locker room and made a hasty meal of sandwiches while he changed

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his clothes. He had arranged a four-ball match with Eric Peterson, Gilbert Carlton and Julian Osborn, all three of them as keen as himself, and able, on good days, as he was, to go round in three and four under ninety. He had worked like a dog all the week. He had no grumbles about business. Margaret was the best and dearest woman the world contained, and as to the boy, — he was the eighth wonder. Added to all this excellence, the course glimmered under a most friendly sun and the warm clean air was sweetened by the scent of new-cut grass.

“Hullo, young Eric,” he called out, yanking on a stocking. “It’s a pretty good earth, son.”

All ready for the match, the man of father-made leisure came down the narrow way between the liver-colored lockers. His white crash knickerbockers, as pristine as freshly fallen snow, stood out in the dim cathedral light of that enormous cellar. His shirt was open at the throat, his shoes were the sorts of things about which the sartorial expert in *Vanity Fair* bursts into sonnets and his stockings of black

and white wool were calculated to make a Ford skid. He might have been a moving-picture hero waiting to appear in a series of scenes representing the moving-picture idea of the idle rich, except for the fact that he was blandly and entirely unself-conscious. He was one of those rare youths who could take meticulous pains over the cut and rightness of his clothes and having got them on forget them.

"Gilbert's out on the putting green," he said, "experimenting with a new stance. Seen anything of Julian?"

"Yes. Played bridge with him on the train. He'll be ready all right. How's the future wife?"

A most beneficent smile broke out on the boy's clean-cut face and he slanted his head in a pæan of silent enthusiasm. For several moments, while watching Bob's energetic movements without seeing them, he stood with his back against a locker and looked into a time three months ahead which, God willing, would find him hand in hand with Mary Miller on the first lap of a new and serious life. No word

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had been said by her as to her plan to send him daily to his father's office. But being a man of imagination, he had sensed it, agreed with it and was only waiting for the time when, the honeymoon over, he returned to earth alive to a great sense of responsibility to become as keen a worker as he had been a lazy object of decoration. The old man should have reason to bless the name of Mary Miller.

And then Gilbert Carlton stalked in, more enviably tanned than ever and with an air of fitness all about him that made men turn and watch him and long for the holidays. "Get a move on, boys," he said. "There are only two foursomes to get off before us. A gorgeous afternoon. Where's Julian?"

"Here, — right on my game."

"Fine," said Bob, springing to his feet. "I'm ready." And he joined Julian at the end of the locker room where he stood, tall and slight and amazingly good-looking in the light from a window, put an arm round the shoulder of his old friend, led him through the billiard room and out into the sunlight to the first tee.

The usual Saturday afternoon gang of heterogeneous caddies was grouped behind the sand-box, bags in hand.

The other two followed, avoiding each other's eyes because they were instinctively well aware of the fact that they were both thinking the same thing, — and they wished that they were not. The peace of Quaker Hill had been broken by Julian Osborn. The undertow of his deplorable sideslip had caught both of them by the feet. More by luck than judgment they had escaped being swept into a sea of trouble. Self-preservation had obliged them to know the truth of the Baltimore incident which had affected the happiness of group after group of the Quaker Hill community. Being safe themselves, they were perfectly ready to deal humanely with Julian. They were honest enough to realize how desperately easy it was to skid into the ditch which runs alongside the little old straight path. They were also members of the conspiracy to protect Bob and Margaret and the boy. But it gave them both a very definite sense of shock to see Bob with his

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arm round the shoulder of the man who had sneaked into his paradise and stolen his wife.

Being young and not having learned the art of reticence, Eric gave rein to his tongue. "Could you live within three thousand miles of Bob if you were Julian?" he asked. "I could n't. His friendship would turn my blood cold and the touch of his hand mark me like a hot iron."

"Um. I was thinking just that," said Gilbert. "But the fact that I know darned well that Julian is feeling just precisely as we do, and a bit over, is why we've got to be almost as sorry for him as we have for Bob, old man. Let's bear that in mind."

There was no snub intended in this reply. The boy knew that, because there was no self-righteousness about Gilbert Carlton, nothing of the schoolmaster. It was the answer of a man of wider sympathy and a deeper knowledge of human nature. He accepted it as such, and was glad that he had spoken. It helped to confirm his admiration for the ex-officer whose gold service stripes carried with them

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the memory of pain, suffering and mistakes and rendered him the more capable of avoiding rough judgments and sweeping condemnation.

"I hope to God Bob will never find out," he thought, and turned his mind to golf.

The course was in perfect condition. The greens resembled velvet, and the sand in the bunkers had been raked into a state of almost ironic tidiness. The fairways were streaked with the recent trail of a grass-cutter, and even the rough, into which men had no right to intrude, wore an enticing look, speckled as it was with the little faces of wild flowers. The crouching line of Long Island stood out clearly across the sparkling Sound and an exhilarating breeze made Old Glory crackle as it flew. The City and its turmoil might have been an ugly dream. Little did the grim and sandy Scots who invented the Royal and Ancient imagine how much health and pleasure and mental perturbation the game of "gowf" would afford to a future age of men whose business bunkers needed stronger weapons than niblicks to nego-

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tiate and whose daily rough required something more than muscle to tackle!

Eric and Gilbert added a matter of thirty yards to their drives because Mary Miller and Elsa Mahan were watching them from the veranda. Both balls, hit well and low, cleared the hill and disappeared into the incline which ran down to the first green, and both girls received a flash of triumphant teeth before the men who meant so much to them marched off imbued with the laudable ambition to lie dead for the putt.

There was a little silence, broken by a laugh and a sigh. It was Elsa who laughed. "How they love it," she said. "I wonder if I shall ever grow jealous of the old game after I'm married. What do you think?"

Mary had sighed because she was happy, — a Gilbertian habit that some girls have. "Sufficient for the day," she answered, in her direct and simple way. "I don't know how I shall feel later on about such problems. I have n't got over the surprise of being engaged yet, and I want to go on enjoying that. You

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see, it 's quite a new thing for me to enjoy myself."

Elsa nodded. She had spent many hours in the efficient studio of the girl who had won her way into the heart of Quaker Hill, and had become possessed with enough of her story of continual struggle to keep the wolf from the door, to appreciate the full bitter meaning of her last remark. She needed no further explanation. After their talks in that renovated barn she had returned to the many turreted house on which her whimsical stepfather had lavished so much money and imagination with a new feeling of gratitude to him for all his kindness and to Fate for having permitted her to pass her life in Easy Street. It had done her good to meet this working girl whose courage and self-reliance had earned her admiration and friendship.

"No more magazine covers soon," she said, "and no more cooking stoves, eh?"

"I 'm not so sure of that," said Mary. "I shall go on with my covers for a time because Eric will be a commuter and I shall have to

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encourage him into the habit of wanting to work. And as to my cooking stove, I'm going to find a place for it in some unused corner so that I can go and look at it sometimes to keep me from getting swollen-headed."

"Just as I shall keep my uniform and gaiters," said Elsa, "to remind me of the chance they gave me to try and live up to Gilbert."

Heaven knows into what further depths of mutual seriousness these two young things might have gone, being alone and emotional, — but, as it happened, Mrs. Hicks butted in, more herbaceously dressed than ever, and turned their thoughts to peroxide, to their own recent escape from the mire of mischief-making and to the ever-present predicament of Bob and Margaret.

Anna Hicks halted in front of them, brazen in her colossal effrontery. And in her embracing smile there was nothing to show her bitter chagrin in having been beaten by them both in her attempts to prevent their becoming engaged. In her own peculiar, unneeded way, she was a most remarkable woman, as much a

menace to the general peace and well-being of a community as a strike or an epidemic.

“What a day,” she said, in her most dangerously cordial way. “God’s in His Heaven and all’s right with the world sort of look everywhere. So nice, is n’t it? I love it, I really do. It makes one feel so smooth and safe, don’t you know. And are n’t you both looking forward to the re-entrance of those two lovely people, Daisy and Julian, to their forgiving and affectionate set? I am. I’m quite excited and stirred. There will be sixteen of us in the party here,—the men all healthy and muscular after this afternoon’s golf and the women in frocks nobody’s seen before. Mine’s a dream. Fancy there not being a cloud in the sky! Wonderful, is n’t it?”

She did n’t wait for an answer, being aware that none was forthcoming. The cold antagonism of the two girls who barely missed being included in her long list of victims left her quite apparently unmoved. She smiled and waved her hand and steered her way to a group of young wives at the far end of the veranda,

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moving with that irritating jauntiness that frequently put into Hicks's brain fantastic thoughts of murder. Her skirts were shorter, her heels higher, and her hips more massive than ever. What did Nature mean by perpetrating so great an error?

With the tragic ten minutes on the Petersons' veranda still tingling in her memory, Mary Miller shivered as she watched her go. Hot and angry and on the verge of a most indiscreet outburst was how Elsa was left. Oh, what would n't she give for the delicious opportunity to make that Hicks woman squirm in public! Some day, perhaps, with luck. But not yet. Not until she and Gilbert had left the altar, and the mischief-maker had been driven out of Quaker Hill to sow the seeds of her poison ivy in another and distant community.

When she turned to her new friend to take her for a walk in the woods, among which the nasty taste in her mouth should be removed by their stillness and beauty, she saw a face so white and eyes so troubled that she cried out "What's the matter?"

"Margaret," said Mary Miller, "and Bob."

"How?"

"You heard that queer ring in her voice?"

"Good Heavens, you don't think that she intends to give Margaret away?"

"It's the one ambition of her life now that all the rest of us have wriggled out of her clutches. I feel in my bones that she has a plan for to-night. Pass the word round that she must not be allowed to have one single minute alone with Bob. I tell you that that woman will never rest until she has revenged herself upon us by bringing misery to Margaret."

For a moment the usually capable and definite Elsa stood irresolute. There was absolute truth in what Mary Miller had said. She knew it. Poor old Bob was the only one left to be practised upon, and somehow, all unsuspecting as he was, he must be saved. He must. He must!

"Let's go and see Frankie," she said, in almost comic desperation. And like frightened rabbits they hurried from the Club.

CHAPTER XIX

THE sun had slipped away for duty elsewhere and the light almost gone out of the sky before Bob's foursome, eighteen holes to the good, marched into the bar. After a ding-dong tussle the match had been halved on the home green, — Bob and Eric against Julian and Gilbert, an epoch-making match in which every man had pulled his best game out of the bag.

“On me,” said Julian, going to the counter from which a hideous return to the worst days of hypocrisy and parish-pumpism had not yet removed the drink that cheers. Cocktails resulted while the card was studied and the battle gone over with laughter and mutual satisfaction. The long, low-ceilinged room was alive with men and voices. Those who had come in

earlier and changed were playing cards. Others were on their way to the locker rooms and the showers. Sun and air and the weekend, — a mighty good combination. It had the effect of making men hang over a poker game with their arms round their neighbors' necks and harmonize the good old songs like boys. You could have cut the noise with a knife.

A note from Frankie was put into Gilbert Carlton's hands as he emerged in his birthday suit from a shower. It was brief and to the point and asked him to give her five minutes before dinner without fail. The last words "the devil has a scheme," puzzled him but sent him quickly to the case in which his evening clothes had been sent over. While Bob, Eric and Julian and all the other men near by sent badinage flying about the locker room and lingered over dressing, Gilbert pushed doggedly ahead, wondering what was in the air, but satisfied that not all the devils extant could stand between himself and Elsa.

Frankie's white hair and tall charming figure

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instantly caught his eye when he arrived in the crowded foyer where all the women of Quaker Hill seemed to be assembled. The sound of their continual buzz was like that of water falling over a weir. Dressed in black, the most becoming and the wisest of all shades, she was surrounded by Olive Rumsey, Nina Hopper, Doris Clayton, Mary Miller, Margaret, Daisy and Elsa. Mrs. Hicks, in what she had called her "dream", but which was more like a nightmare of a seed merchant, was holding forth to Susan Kester a little apart. She struck a jazz-like note in a melody of color.

Frankie, who had been watching the stairway that led up from the locker rooms, immediately disentangled herself from her group, led Gilbert into a little room behind the office and shut the door carefully. She wore the air of a Brigade Major of Artillery, cool, alert and capable.

"Never mind how," she said, "but through a series of deductions I have come to the conclusion that our persistent trouble-maker, Anna Hicks, is going to play her last and strongest

card to-night. By that I mean, of course, that she intends, if not prevented, to give Bob absolute proof that Margaret was at Baltimore with Julian, — and you can see for yourself what that will do.”

“ Good God ! ” said Gilbert. “ But why on earth should she do such a diabolical thing ? ”

“ She has no children, my friend, and in her few honest moments realizes that she is blessed by nature neither with good looks nor a lovable character, and so she goes through life with the determination of paying nature out by doing all the harm she can to luckier people. I may be wrong, but that ’s how I sum up the psychology of the mischief-maker.”

“ What proof has she got ? ” asked the practical Gilbert.

“ Well, I happen to know that she has bribed a clerk in her husband’s office to sneak into her hands evidence of the fact that Mary Miller went to Margaret’s rescue. Think, my dear Gilbert, only just *think* what will happen to Bob if this thing is shown to him.”

Gilbert screwed up his eyes, as men did when

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they heard a scream of pain out in the darkness of No Man's Land.

"But if we keep it away from him to-night," he said, "there is to-morrow."

"That's true, but by to-morrow I shall have worked out a plan to put the fear of God into that woman's substitute for a heart. We are now up against to-night, so we must all combine never to let Mrs. Hicks alone. Fasten on her yourself, — let that be your particular business. Elsa will understand because she and Mary Miller and the rest of us have had a conclave. And now out quick before Bob comes up — and hang on to that creature like a bulldog to a bone."

He was only just in time. Following Julian and Eric, Bob had halted on the top of the stairs to look for Margaret. Gilbert deployed to the left and planted himself in front of Mrs. Hicks at the moment that she was oozing her way through the crowd to speak to her newest victim. If you have ever seen the expression of an African kroo-boy when he is about to steal a bottle of whiskey out of your kit, you

will know how Peroxide Anna looked as Gilbert caught her.

"Hullo, Mrs. Hicks," he cried out, with the most perfect simulation of cordial bonhomie. "How are you? And gee-whiz, what a corking frock!"

Two sour eyes ran slowly from the top of his head to the tip of his pumps and all the way back again. And finally this: "How clever some of us imagine ourselves to be, don't we?"

Whereupon Gilbert settled down to face the most undelectable incident of his career and laid himself in sacrifice upon the altar of friendship.

Then began an evening that few members of that apparently high-spirited party will ever forget. Of them all only Julian, Wilbur Hicks and Bob were unaware of the fact that they were sitting at a table under which there was an unexploded bomb. Poor Margaret, whose nerves had already been torn to tatters, had been warned by Frankie. How gladly she would have died where she sat to shock Mrs. Hicks into mercy. Daisy had also been put on

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her guard and enrolled for service. And all through that dreadful dinner she exhausted the list of possible things that Bob might do to Julian if the truth were told. Mary Miller and Elsa Mahan played up with desperate and glittering cheerfulness, hot and cold by turns, because both had felt the nails of Mrs. Hicks's cruel hand upon their flesh. Eric, who had received brief but implicit instructions from Gilbert, and Frankie Mundy, who was filled with the intensest sympathy for Margaret, watched over the blissfully unconscious Bob.

As for Mrs. Hicks, her unaccustomed popularity puzzled but did not give her the clue to the almost universal determination to head her off. Under the influence of several cocktails she presently began to flatter herself that her new creation had made a stir and that her wit was beginning to be appreciated. She basked in the unremitting attentions of Gilbert Carlton. How could any one possibly have discovered her possession of the incriminating paper? She didn't dream that, by one of those amazing coinci-

dences which happen every day, Frankie's maid was being "sought" by Wilbur Hicks's frail clerk and who, in order to demonstrate his business astuteness, had boasted to the girl of his little deal with his employer's wife. The story had been carried immediately to Frankie and thus had been created one weapon for the protection of Bob and another, which Frankie was even then sharpening for use, with which to cut Mrs. Hicks's head off.

All went well while the dinner progressed and Mrs. Hicks was hedged in between Gilbert and Eric. But when the meal was finished and every one filed into the ballroom or out on the veranda, then the difficulty of the situation began, and the appalling part of it was that Bob showed a distinct desire to be polite and dance with Mrs. Hicks, because she was the wife of one of the men with whom he played bridge on the train.

For an hour Mrs. Hicks was kept on the floor without once being allowed to sit out and Gilbert and the rest watched the clock with growing confidence. But then Bob went off to

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telephone to a man at Greenwich who was coming over in the morning for a round of golf, and Mrs. Hicks slipped away to powder her nose. Mounting guard outside the door of the lady's room, Nina Hopper was found by a girl who had been at school with her and had just returned from Red Cross work in France. And during the moment that her back was turned Mrs. Hicks came out, caught sight of Bob at the very instant that he was leaving the telephone booth, pounced on him like a boa constrictor and asked for a few words in the moonlight on the deserted front steps of the Club House. Thus, by a cynical trick of Fate, all the well-intentioned work of Bob's protectors went for nothing.

Becoming impatient, Nina looked into the lady's room, saw that Mrs. Hicks had escaped and flew off to Frankie in a panic. Bob also was missing and without a second's hesitation Frankie marshalled her forces together and led them into the foyer for the search.

Gilbert made a dash at the boy who was in charge of the door. "Did you see where Mr.

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Meredith went when he'd finished telephoning?"

The answer fell with a thud on the hearts of all the listeners.

"Yes, sir. Out in front with Mrs. Hicks."

Headed by the conscience-stricken Nina, out they all went, and there, a few feet from the great round flower bed in the centre of the drive, stood the dumpy figure in the comic frock, the moonlight on her all too golden head, and a crumple of paper lying at her feet.

Upon this Eric pounced as Nina and Elsa Mahan seized Mrs. Hicks by the arms. There was no sign of Bob.

The look of triumph faded from the woman's face. "What's all this?" she blurted out.

"Take her along to the tennis courts," said Frankie. "No one can hear or see us there. Eric, find Bob, quick. Don't come back without him."

The boy charged back to the house.

"Let me go, or I'll scream the sky down," cried Mrs. Hicks.

But the two girls had her in a man's grip and

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ran her, struggling and gurgling, to the first of the tennis courts, where they forced her to a standstill behind a screen of bushes.

Frankie, Margaret, Daisy and Mary Miller, with Gilbert on their heels, followed instantly and surrounded the woman, whose unpleasant face was white with rage and fear. It was an extraordinary scene in that highly civilized place. Every one of those people had become primeval under the stress of emotion, and for all their modern clothes, flung back to an age when skins were the only wear and passions had no check.

"~~Did~~ you show this paper to Bob Meredith?" demanded Frankie.

"What's that got to do with you?"

"Did you? Did you?" The chorus was an angry one, and threatening.

"For God's sake, tell us," cried Margaret, with her hands stretched out.

"If you don't let me go I'll have the law on you."

Nina burst into a scoffing laugh and yanked the arm she held.

Gilbert went one pace nearer.

"Answer that question or as God's my judge I'll carry you into the middle of the ballroom and make you answer it there, before your husband."

There was a moment's silence, broken only by the sound of many breathings and the sleepy rustling of leaves.

"Very well then, I did. And I had the right. I was n't going to see that man made a fool of by a guilty woman and her pack of friends. What about it? It's a free country."

Gilbert caught Margaret as her knees gave way and her little cry rose up to the pitying angels.

"But not so free as to allow you to continue to poison the air of this place," said Frankie. "You have delivered yourself at last into our hands. Those papers and the story of how you got them shall be given to Wilbur Hicks, and if you are not clear of Quaker Hill by Monday you shall be placed under boycott and treated like a pariah dog. Let her go, my friends, and

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may she find it in her soul to be sorry for this most dastardly of all her tricks."

The two girls drew back, the circle was opened up and without another word that past mistress in the gruesome art of destroying the happiness of a community walked unevenly away.

It was Daisy who went to Margaret and kissed her and held her tight. She too felt as though she had been wrecked in mid-ocean and was hanging to a spar. In Margaret's mind there was only the sight of a quiet pool beneath the arms of trees.

And then Eric come up and every one hung upon his words.

"Bob's nowhere to be found," he said quietly. "No one's seen him at all. But I've brought Julian with me. I thought he ought to be here and be told what's happened."

And Julian, the handsome Julian, who had honestly done his best to unspoil himself and play the game, but whose one false step had imprinted an indelible mark upon the lives of all the people who faced him, passed, startled,

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into that strange emotional group, out there under that placid impersonal moon.

"What's the matter?" he asked abruptly, looking from Frankie to Margaret, whose face was hidden in the shoulder of his wife.

Frankie put her hand on his arm. "Go and find Bob," she said. "You are the man to do this."

"Bob? Why? What's happened?"

Frankie pointed to the two women who were trying to comfort each other. "Need you ask?" she said.

He had seen Mrs. Hicks going to the place where the cars were parked. He had seen the look in Eric's eyes as the boy beckoned him off the floor of the ballroom. He now saw Daisy holding Margaret against her heart. There was in very truth no need for him to ask — Bob, the man who loved and believed in him, had been told.

"Yes, I am the man to do this. I will go and find Bob," he said, and with a humbleness that was strangely moving and pathetic, he bent down and kissed his wife's hand.

CHAPTER XX

JULIAN OSBORN and Bob Meredith had stood in solemn inarticulation and eyed each other, in the usual manner of boys, when one was six and the other six and a half. Their parents, then unacquainted, had taken adjoining bungalows on the dunes at Easthampton, — simple and not unpicturesque wooden buildings perched up on a ridge of yellow sand and green scrub within a hundred yards of the eternal sea; sun-bathed, spray-smitten, and frequently fog immersed.

Setting out on a tour of discovery the morning after their arrival, expecting to find treasure and old spars, bones of pirates and footprints of man Friday, they had come suddenly face to face on the narrow board walk which ran unevenly and insecurely between the two cottages, halted and gazed. The handsome

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Julian, with his curly hair and long-lashed eyes, his white shirt open at the neck and khaki shorts well above his bare knees, carried a large water pistol thrust into his belt, together with a wooden axe and a whistle attached to a cord. A new and enviable air gun was slung across his shoulder with which to defend himself to the death against the innumerable enemies who certainly lurked near by and to provide the family larder with bison, buffalo, deer and probably an occasional elephant. He was a fine, well-put-together, fearless lad, unconsciously graceful and with an air of leadership that made an instant impression. The more sturdy Bob, irregular of feature, untidy of appearance and with a thick mat of brown hair that did just exactly as it liked despite his brush and comb, was empty-handed, although his pockets were already stuffed with shells, pieces of cork and round stones which had been smoothed and polished by the ins and outs of countless tides.

In his kind and honest eyes, as he examined this obviously favored specimen of a recognized species, the first note of admiration came which

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the sight of Julian had ever afterwards called up, and in his young heart he knew instantly that there stood one whom he would follow without question, trust to the ultimate edge of faith, and look up to as Captain during every adventure and hair-raising expedition which life had to offer in the immediate future, out there by the sea.

And that was the beginning of a friendship in which Julian was David and Bob Jonathan. The two boys were sent to the same school, afterwards going together from Lawrenceville to Princeton. Julian's early tendency to patronize the good-natured Bob and take advantage of the hero-worship which broke into bloom when they had come face to face that first sunny morning was continued through boyhood and youth. Bob's brain worked slowly and lacked the audacity and brilliance of Julian's. He took orders from his friend and carried them out with all the characteristic accuracy and attention to detail that made him an invaluable lieutenant at school and college. His soundness, honesty and the sort of loyalty

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that makes men fight and die won and held Julian's respect and affection, although Bob's inherent dislike of deceit and incapability of deviating the fraction of an inch from the truth were sometimes irritating to one who was a little careless in his methods in the achievement of his purpose.

They worked and played together and were inseparable until the time arrived when Julian found that there were other amusements than those of sport, other triumphs to obtain than those of football and tennis. His dark eyes and straight nose and curly hair, his ever-ready laugh, his trick of looking at a girl as though she were the most desirable creature under the sky, his knack of being able to say those primeval things the personal note of which outrages a woman's sense of propriety but has a most soothing effect upon her vanity, opened up possibilities of which he was quick to take advantage. During his last year at Princeton he made frequent dashes into life, but surreptitiously and without once giving away any of the details of the history that he was making to the

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man from whom he had never before withheld a single thought or action. He was keenly anxious not to do anything that should damage the respect in which he was held by the simple, forthright Bob, — friend that sticketh closer than a brother.

When finally these two left college for the University of the World, the one to enter his father's business and the other to join the banking firm of an uncle, they shared rooms in a bachelor apartment house in West Forty-fourth Street and spent their holidays together in Europe or on the cat-boat mutually owned on the waters of their own country. Marriage, in the same year, failed by a miracle to separate them. They settled within sight of each other's houses on the high ridge of Quaker Hill, went in and came back on the same trains and generally lunched together in the same restaurant. Among all the impossible things that come almost daily into the lives of God's creatures the one that seemed to be the most utterly impossible was anything in the nature of a break in the fine and splendid friendship of

these two men. Not a day slipped off the calendar that did not bring upheavals and revisions, changes and revolutions. Among them all, however, the relations between Bob and Julian remained firm and rocklike and apparently eternal. In the disappointments and disillusion which both were inevitably asked to face they renewed their faith in humanity and their courage to deal with the struggle to live in the light of each other's eyes. And then, to the everlasting shame of a cynically minded Fate, that moonlit evening came when Margaret and Julian discovered that even loyalty and lifelong friendship stood for nothing under the onrush of passion; that Nature, which pays no heed to the laws of morality and the codes of civilization, was too strong to resist.

Tingling with an excitement which made them catch their breath at the sight of one another and caused them to walk as people do in the dark, they played with the situation, and flirted with the danger like moths flapping about a glassed-in flame.

There were moments, whole hours even, dur-

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ing these chaotic weeks when one or the other turned cold and looked at the figures of Bob and Daisy and the boy through the right end of the telescope. To their credit it must be said that more than once they put up an hysterical fight against the urge that was in them and cried out to whatever God they hoped there was to send them out of the main current that was sweeping them into the sea and into one which would carry them once more into the safe and pleasant backwater of which they had become accustomed. But when they met next day the spark of passion flared and blinded them and the power to fight went limp and died. Finally, sacrificing on the altar of desire sanity, self-respect and all that they owed to wife and husband, came the stolen visit to Baltimore, followed by the discovery by Daisy, the case in Court, the appalling awakening, the return to Quaker Hill, and the anxious hope, renewed again and again, that every day piled upon the day preceding might eventually bury the truth from poor old Bob beneath an immovable mound.

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But whatever else may die and disappear, truth alone remains. Earth, however barren and neglected, catches its seed, nourishes its roots, brings out its blossom, and the unsuspecting breeze captures the pollen from its little heart and blows it into the soul of man.

Bob had been told, and it was in character with the queer irony of life that it now fell to Julian to find him in his agony. Leaving his wife and Margaret and the group of loyal friends who had tried so hard to keep the mischief-maker away from Bob, Julian recrossed the road. His car was among the phalanx of automobiles parked to the left of the Country Club. Light streamed from all the windows of the building and the quiet air quivered under the strident sounds of the band in the ball-room. The man in charge of the drum and the rest of his West African instruments of torture was using them all in an ecstasy of lunacy. The notes of the blatant cornet shattered the magic of the night. It seemed to Julian to be a horrible and fantastic *Te Deum* on the death of a friendship.

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Getting into his car he left the hideous sounds behind him and drove along the deserted road beneath the branches of noiseless trees. He knew instinctively that Bob had crept like a wounded dog to his kennel and that he would find him shut up in the den to which he took his work and his anxieties and sat among the memories of his youth to grapple with the problems of his business. There was a light in the well-known window when he ran the car up the hill and brought it to a standstill in front of the house, which was indeed a homestead, from which he had stolen the wife of his friend. The lower rooms were in darkness except for a gleam in the hall. The main door was open and without a moment's hesitation Julian went in. On an old carved chest beneath the stairs a scarf had been flung which he recognized as one that Margaret had worn at Baltimore. Sitting beside it, in what seemed to Julian to be an attitude of guardianship, was a large Teddy bear.

"Too late," he thought, as he caught the beady eyes. "The damage has been done, old

man." And he paused for a moment in a place made all the more familiar because it was hung with many of the prints that he had helped to collect and looked about him with a poignant sense of pain. Under the lamp was a picture of dunes and sea, and back into his mind flashed the long-forgotten figure of a sturdy, honest boy with unruly hair and a look of hero-worship in his eyes. Friend that sticketh closer than a brother!

He went upstairs, opened the door of the den and shut it behind him. Within a few yards of him, all crumpled in his chair, sat Bob like a man who had been struck by lightning.

In a deathly silence, broken not so much as by the patient ticking of a clock, Julian waited for Bob to raise his head. It had come to him once or twice during moments of intense imagination, probably when he had stood at the open grave of his father or under the whispering arches of a great Cathedral, that some day he, like the rest of us, must ultimately stand, without a rag of subterfuge, before the Judgment seat. He would rather have done so then, be-

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ing dead, than see the look in the eyes of his friend that he knew must come. And as he waited, aware of the position and the subject of every picture on the walls and of the photographs of himself in all the various stages of his youth and manhood, he knew that he was to be called upon, for the first time in his life, to be as honest as this most honest man; that he could bring to his aid, by way of apology, none of the brilliant inventiveness of which he was an expert. No longer was he the master spirit, the captain and the leader who, with the old touch of patronage, was there to issue instructions to his trusting lieutenant. All that was gone forever. He was now the humble, contrite man, discovered in a mean and disloyal action which had staggered the great friendships of the world.

But the look did n't come. When at last Bob moved, it was to get up stiffly, unlock a drawer in the bureau, put a revolver on the table in the middle of the room and go with a sort of lurch to the window. He neither looked nor spoke, but stood, as though his action ex-

plained itself, with his back to the man whom he had followed without question, loved second only to his wife and trusted to the ultimate edge of faith.

If an earthquake had tilted the house like a rowboat on a rough sea, it would not have given as great a shock to Julian as the sight of that revolver, — the handsome Julian to whom life had been a smooth and easy business, whose self-made snags he had invariably overcome by charm of manner, sudden inspirations and the most amazing luck. With a sudden contraction of heart he realized that he was expected to pay for disloyalty in the one way conceivable to Bob. He knew, without argument, that in order to live up to the last poor remnants of his friend's respect he must go out quietly, put the revolver in his mouth and send himself into whatever future awaited him. . . . He would do it, of course. Training, breeding and pride demanded this. He had disabused friendship, — he could at least live up to courage. But . . . good God, there were all the splendid years that he must lose, all the plans, ambitions, pleas-

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ures and duties that he could never fulfill. There were Daisy's grief, the jeers of the people who had been made to look small by him, the I-told-you-so of his enemies, the sudden sense of fright at the knowledge that he was going on a one-way ticket into uncertainty, — the sight of himself, cut clear as in a photograph, lying out under trees damaged and unbeautiful. . . .

He went to the table and with an icy hand picked up the revolver, his imagination running before him to a solitary place at which he had often thrown a careless glance on his way to the fifth tee, where trees hung thickly over a singing stream bordered with rocks. More than once the thought had passed through his mind that death, with its burden, must often cross those stepping-stones at night. But when he reached the door and turned the handle Bob spoke.

“Did she love you?” he asked.

To say no would be to lie. It would also make Margaret out to be a light woman, worthless in the estimation of the man who loved her. Love, at any rate, excused.

"Yes," said Julian. "Then."

"What do you mean by 'then'?"

"I made her love me, for the time being. I led her on and tempted her."

Julian seized this chance to make things easier for Margaret and temper the wind to his friend. He himself was as good as dead.

"What got into you?"

"I don't know."

"Try to tell me before you go. To-morrow I shall have to face Margaret, — and the day after and onwards."

He was shortly to stand at the steps of the Judgment seat. The absolute truth, to which he had not always stuck, needed some rehearsal. "I was out of temper with Daisy," said Julian. "I was in the mood to believe that she expected too much of me, — home every night, every moment accounted for, no leeway for temporary aberrations. I had been rotting for years. It took some getting over. It had become a habit. There had been scenes and back answers. Her people suspected me. Everything was edgeways."

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"Rotting for years, — *you?*" Bob turned incredulously.

And as Julian met that man's honest eyes, the color mounted to the roots of his hair. He felt like a schoolboy.

"Yes. At Princeton and afterwards. I was too damned conceited. It was easy to hide it from you. You believed in me like a religion. I found women easy too, — the ones who had to be easy. It was easy street all along."

"Go on," said Bob, with a sort of groan.

"Then came Daisy. I believe if she'd been difficult to win and difficult to hold, my vanity would have been occupied, kept busy. But she was in love with me before I was in love with her. Psychologically, to one of my temperament, that meant early discontent. There was nothing to take hold of and work for after marriage. It left me groping about, unsatisfied. Looking back at it now and examining the whole thing nakedly, I was under the reaction of all that easiness. I wanted to come up against something that might beat me, some-

thing to try my whole strength against. If you know anything about me, and I wonder how much you do, you 'll understand what I 'm trying to drive at."

" I don't understand. Tell me."

It was a weird and wonderful moment in the lives of these two men, this David and this Jonathan. Here was one, having accepted a silent condemnation to suicide, trying to be meticulously honest with himself and to lay his soul open to the other who held him back from death for a few minutes, in order, with pathetic eagerness, to find extenuating circumstances not only for his wife's unfaithfulness, but for his friend's disloyalty, — the last being almost as frightful as the first.

Julian left the door and went to the table and leaned on it with one hand, holding the revolver in the other. And Bob moved nearer to listen with the most painful concentration, — the earth asleep, the cold moon indifferent, the beat of the world's heart quiet and regular.

" I did n't actually realize it then, but now I know that the sight of Margaret provided me

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with just precisely the sort of vanity test that I'd never had and needed. The fact that she was your wife put her outside any remote possibility of my attempting to play any tricks. As such, too, she ought to have been, and apparently was, among the few really happy women in the place. Here was something to beat me, if you like. Here was the unattainable, the unachievable, a perpendicular climb. It was the utter impossibility of making it that intrigued me and set me working, that being my mood. Never dreaming that I could have the slightest effect on her and hoping that I never should, I began to exert all the untried subtlety that was in me to draw her away from you."

"You devil," cried Bob.

"Yes, devil's the word. It was the devil in me that made me do it. Just the same devil that made me start things at Princeton that would have killed me stone dead if I'd been caught. In fact, it was vanity, which *is* the devil. I had to believe myself in love with Margaret. I had to force myself to think that she was the one woman on earth who stirred me

and turned me crazy. Over and over again I repeated these things to myself until they became fixed ideas. To a man of your honesty and straightness all this must sound like insanity. And it would be in any one who had n't been born with the artistic temperament, as I am. I don't say this by way of excuse but in an attempt at explanation."

"Go on."

Julian leaned forward and the light fell on his curly hair and straight nose, his large eyes and well-cut chin. His was certainly the almost impossible face that is conceived by women who draw for magazines. He ought to have gone on the stage and have become a matinee idol and stood in limelight and worked off his superabundant vanity in the applause of dim audiences. Some men have the need of this.

"I made subterranean passages to reach Margaret's latent sense of romance. I cut myself out to get into the chinks of her armor of faithfulness. I dropped vague hints, practised all the cunning arts of the lover" — he did n't spare himself — "and whenever possible fired

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her by the touch of my hot hand Bob, in all this, as I knew, Margaret got something that she had missed but the desire for which had been injected into her blood at school by reading erotic books and talking after lights out with romantic minded girls. She loved you, old man — ”

Bob shook his head and shivered.

“ She did and does and always will, — but she married you before she had worked off any of this girl-stuff, this adventure-thing, that is bred in boarding schools. I swear to it that when I started in she was only interested in me as your pal and the man who had married her intimate friend. But when she saw in my eyes something that ought n’t to have been in them — get this, Bob — the unsatisfied adventure-idea took hold of her and turned everything upside down. You did n’t understand that part of her. You gave her everything that you could conceive her wanting, but like many other women of her temperament, Margaret needed a touch of unhappiness in her life. She was n’t contented with a series of completely unworried

days, a blissful routine under a cloudless sky. She had a vague desire for a mental and physical struggle that would give her the chance to act a part, martyrize herself, like the Ibsen women, and get into a maze of doubts and fears and hopes. Like mine, hers is the artistic temperament, that cursed thing that ought to be treated as an infirmity because it makes us look at life through the wrong end of the telescope."

Bob made another step nearer to the table. His attention was eager, hungry. He began to see a light in the utter darkness of his pain and so find a kind of justification for Margaret in Julian's complete dissection of her character and his own.

"Well," he said, "well?"

And Julian went on again, inspired with the hope of guiding his friend into a line of thought which would lead to his being able to forgive Margaret. If he could do that he could go over the border with an easier conscience.

"Her struggle began after I had made her think that she loved me, — a desperate

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struggle. Against my urgency she pitted you and the boy and home. And every time she did this and begged me to let her alone I pressed and tempted. If she had been easy it would have been over. I was sick of easiness. It was the new joy of fighting to win, every inch of the way difficult, that egged me on. Even when she finally caved in and joined me at Baltimore, she froze and hid behind you and the boy. You were the man she loved and she was straight. This was only the fascination of the old adventure stuff. Can you see that?"

Bob put his hands over his face and groaned and stood rigid.

"The next morning, before we left the hotel, the detectives sent after me by Daisy's people got into our rooms and we came back, jerked out of this temperamental aberration, pretty badly awake. You know something of the rest, but not all. You don't know that I came here the night I brought her back from the Court and asked her to chuck you and bolt with me. You don't know that I did this in a frantic endeavor to own up to the thing because

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facing you was worse than hell. You don't know how she sent me away so that she might dedicate the rest of her life to you and the kid. And nobody will ever know what you've made me suffer by your almost awful faith in me, — except God. Bob, old pal, go and find Margaret. She's with Daisy, in my house, wondering if she'll ever see you again. She loves you completely. She's not a worse woman for knowing me, but a better one. She's found herself and knows the value of you and happiness. . . . Leave these pictures of me on your walls. Give me a thought sometimes. Tell yourself that I was too damned vain. Goodby."

But before Julian could reach the door, Bob, understanding from this pre-death soul disclosure, that his friend and his wife had broken faith under the influence of artistic temperament — the word malady had shown the way to this realization — had his back to it. Tears were streaming down his face. Who was he to judge? And he put out his hand, grabbed the revolver and hurled it through the open win-

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dow. It fell with a thud on the lawn. As he had done years and years before, when no brush could conquer his thick mat of brown hair and the other boy, his David, had just escaped from drowning, he flung out his arms and cried out "Julian — Julian," — and Julian, after a moment of startled irresolution, lurched forward and went into them, time and bad memories wiped out, put his head on the shoulder of that humble man and broke into sobs.

Friend that sticketh closer than a brother. . .

CHAPTER XXI

UNDISTURBED by a single sound, the hush of night lay upon the earth. The cool light of the pale-faced moon spread a white coverlet over everything. The intermittent puffs of breeze which had kept the leaves awake had all died away. The world was asleep.

But there was the flutter of light frocks in the summerhouse in Julian's garden and the murmur of anxious voices. Under the charge of Frankie Mundy, whose gift of shepherding had never been so sympathetically exercised, Nina Hopper, Mary Miller, Elsa Mahan and Eric Peterson were waiting for something — they hardly knew what — and about which they dreaded to think. They had brought Margaret and Daisy to the house and left them together, and then had gone out into the sleeping

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garden to stand by loyally for anything that they might be called upon to do in the supreme crisis of the Quaker Hill trouble.

The three girls sat close with light wraps over their bare shoulders. Mary Miller, in the middle, had retained her characteristic attitude of mental and physical courage. Her shoulders were squared and her chin high. Her short life had contained many equally serious episodes, and practise makes perfect. The other girls, tired and frazzled by the excitement of the strange evening during which they had been called upon to play important parts, sagged like unwatered flowers. Eric Peterson, whose imagination had been stirred and whose sense of drama let loose, sat by himself on the narrow seat of that rustic and uncomfortable resting place, with his elbows on his knees and his face between his hands. He was picturing the scene which he knew must be taking place in Bob's den and throwing all his sympathy into the room in which poor Margaret was waiting with Daisy, in a state of terror. From time to time he looked over his shoulder

at the house a few hundred yards away and at the lights in the living room which glinted through the young trees. It had been a bad evening, and he would have given a great deal if it might never have taken place.

"Bob knows, Bob knows," he kept repeating to himself, and with a shudder of pain tried to put himself into the shoes of both the men who had been called upon to face each other under those appalling circumstances. Like every one else who lived on Quaker Hill he knew the good story of the long and intimate friendship of Bob and Julian, and better than most, because his was the sensitive nature of a poet, in which there is a deep understanding of other men's agony; he was almost as sorry for one as for the other. His heart bled for the two young wives.

The dilettante, the spoilt boy of civilization and wealth, who had tuned his ears only to the melody and let his eyes rest only on the beauty of life, had come up against one of its tragedies. And it hurt.

As for Frankie Mundy of the white hair and

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the empty heart and the kind hand, she, as was her habit in time of trouble, was on her feet, alert and electrical, her brain completely under control and her thoughts working toward sane and common-sense plans for the amelioration of the suffering of her friends. She paced noiselessly up and down on the soft turf, keenly alive to the blow which had fallen upon Bob's unsuspecting head in spite of all her attempts to ward it off. She had sent Gilbert Carlton over to Bob's house, not to spy but to hold himself in readiness in sound of it should it seem to him that he could be of use.

At first, while she waited, it was with keyed-up nerves and rapid pulse. The angel of Death seemed to be hovering over Quaker Hill and the beating of his wings filled her with apprehension. She had recognized the sound. But after a time, hearing it no longer, she gathered the peace and the magic of that exquisite night into her soul and was lifted out of her immediate anxiety.

It came to her, as it comes to us all sometimes, when the earth is flooded with moonlight

and the sky all aflame with the candles of Heaven, that the tragedies of God's children are nothing but a part of the test of living, the heart-breaks that belong to what is only a period of apprenticeship for the next test on a higher plane, itself but the second stepping-stone perhaps to the true life at the feet of the Great Father. And presently, her soul exalted and receptive to the psychic influences with which the air is filled but which we are so seldom in tune to catch, it came to her more strongly and with greater comfort than ever before that the man whom she herself had lost was not dead, but was numbered among the survivors of death, that his spirit was in closer touch with her than he had ever been able to bring it. And that his everlastingly beloved voice was whispering the words of charity and forgiveness in her ear that she might presently speak to poor old Bob if he emerged from the blackness of disillusion in a state of anger and despair, and she drew up short and clasped her hands together, with her face sweetened and childlike, and won, because of her faith and kindness, a brief per-

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mission to see beyond the little gulf that divides life from renewed life, — and joy blossomed in her heart. . . .

Gilbert touched her on the arm. The others crowded around to hear what he had to say. "I saw Julian go into Bob's room," he said, "and stand for a long time with his back to the door. Then I saw Bob get up and put something on the table. The blinds were up and the room well lighted, and I stood among the trees as you told me to do and waited. Somehow I didn't think that Julian was meant ever to come out of that house again on his feet. After a time something was flung by Bob out of the window and as it lay on the lawn with the moonlight on it, I could see that it was a revolver. It was easier to wait after that. At last I saw Bob totter forward, and he and Julian stood clasped in each other's arms like boys. And finally all the lights except one were turned out, and Bob and Julian came into the garden arm in arm, heading for this house. And I slipped away and came here by the short cut. That's all I have to report." He cleared

his throat and ran his hand over his close-cropped hair.

Tears sparkled on Frankie's eyelashes and a little smile illumined her face. "We may all go home," she said. "We have nothing more to do except to thank God for the triumph of sanity. Don't let's omit to do that thing, any of us. Nina, you and I will go on ahead and make plans for a descent on Wilbur Hicks. Quaker Hill won't wholly recover from its series of shocks until his deplorable wife is pushed out neck and crop. That's the next job. Good night, boys and girls."

She waved her hand to the engaged couples and ran it through the cool slim arm of the girl whose husband was probably stalking impatiently from room to room and playing sister Anne at the window which overlooked the drive. He was a high-strung person, for a lawyer, and became extremely jangled at anything that disturbed the routine of his tidy and well-regulated life. It seemed to him, too, that his wife need not have taken so active a part in what, with characteristic pedanticism,

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he called the "matrimonial cataclysm" of the Merediths and the Osborns. He had been, it must be confessed, more than a little confused and irritated at the sudden disappearance of Nina and her friends from the ballroom, and it did him no good to be perfectly certain that on her return to their mutual roof he would be obliged to stifle his questions to unhook her frock, get her something to eat and drink, and be put off with "Not tonight, I'm too tired," when finally he attempted to improve the occasion with a few pedantic reproaches. He might be and was an assertive and unsquashable counsel when he stood before a judge. When he stood before the imperturbable Nina he became, almost at once, a toleration, an accepted fact, a creature to fetch and carry and obey instructions. It made him a more assertive lawyer, that was certain — he had to take it out on some one — but it fell in entirely with his long established and ingrained views of happy married existence. So he had no real grievance.

Gilbert and Elsa followed, having said good night to Eric and Mary Miller, who seemed to

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be in no great hurry to leave the summerhouse, and for a while neither spoke. They held hands and breathed in the perfumed air and walked with a sense of ease, like people who had been relieved of a heavy weight. Marriage lay before them, an Elysium unentered, an adventure untried, and in the good confidence of lovers they did not permit the proof of the matrimonial difficulties that had been brought before them to dampen their ardor. To Elsa, Gilbert had nothing in him of Julian, and to Gilbert Elsa was a very different girl from Margaret, — and that, however great a temptation it afforded to Fate, was as it should be.

And presently Elsa spoke. “Oh, Gilbert,” she whispered.

“What is it, darling?”

“It won’t be long now, will it?”

“No, not long, thank God.”

She snuggled up to his arm, — a little thing against his six-feet-one. “I’ve decided to have the walls of the living room painted green, — lettuce color. And to have your den papered in light brown, like putty. It shows up

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book shelves so well and the sort of man-pictures that are going to hang there. Don't you think so? "

Gilbert smiled a little. The house that he was to earn and build was a mere speck on the horizon. "What you say goes, my Babe," he said.

"And we won't have a dining room. It's a waste of good space in a small house, being only used for meals. We'll throw it into the main room and have a gate-legged table in a corner. That's the best way, I think. Don't you? "

And Gilbert did n't laugh, being both in love and wise. But it came to him vaguely that there was the inevitable time ahead when this young thing would follow the example of her kind and see to it that she had not only had a dining room, but a pompous dining room, with glass doors, furnished stiffly with near antiques and oldish silver and expensive lace and an old master or two glooming down from the walls. And he would work for them all, eagerly enough, and go prematurely gray in the attempt, like other men. She was worth it.

Arrived at the Castle, whose towers loomed picturesquely against the sky, he wound with her up the innumerable brick steps, past urns and dryads, to the iron-studded doors which gave the romantic Irishman so many thrills of pride, and here he held her tight in his arms and kissed her lips and hair and waited for a moment, alone, to heave a sigh and renew his determination to get down to work to the making of that house whose rooms should be any old color, so that she lived in them.

And in much the same manner and with many of the same thoughts and words, young Eric saw Mary Miller back to the cow-barn in which she had put up her fight to keep the wolves from the door, and go the way of most resistance. How simple to have slipped into luxury and doubtfulness and gone the easiest way and been out of the grim struggle. And yet how difficult, with tradition behind her and the possession of good blood and the constant help of a father and mother dead but living, who infused the air she breathed with courage.

"Through the dim halls of night," said Eric,

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falling back on Whitman, "to the sugar boxes and the drawing boards." He caught hold of her and held up her face. "But not much longer, not for many more weeks. And then, — what?"

"Tell me," said Mary.

Eric drew in such a long breath that his studs almost leaped from his shirt. "Well, I've got a growing belief that I shall soon be ruining my trousers on one of those tilting chairs in father's office, young 'un. I feel in my bones that you are willing me to become a commuter. Own up and be honest. All right. Fine. It's the age of revolutions, but even away down in the narrow purlieus of Whitehall Street a man may retain his soul and see a peep of the sky at the top of the gully."

"Darling," said Mary Miller.

"For you and for love," said Eric and kissed her with a new touch of passion.

And presently, turning back for the hundredth time to watch the light in her studio, the boy stopped short in the middle of his father's acres, halfway between the stunted barn and

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the opulent mansion, the moonlight, almost as sharp as that of the sun, glorifying both and spreading over everything a thin layer of snow. And he squared his shoulders and clenched his fists and flung back his head.

“I’ll show you,” he cried aloud. “I’ll show you all, — the lot of you. In the old man’s footsteps, — that’s the way she wants me to go and I will, by God, I will.”

And he held his hand up as though registering an oath, his face stamped with young enthusiasm and self-sacrifice and his heart swimming in emotion.

And so it goes on Quaker and every other Hill, and in all the valleys beneath — “Love that endures for a breath: Night the shadow of light, and light the shadow of death.”

CHAPTER XXII

Bob and Julian went the long way round.

There were no gleaming windows in the houses they passed, and the road rang only with their own footsteps. They said very little, — something about the weather and golf and next summer's holidays, but they went arm-in-arm. To Julian that midnight walk was accompanied by the sensations of a man who sees old familiar objects and landmarks again after having been given his passport to Eternity. Everything was touched with a greater beauty and a sense of being more keenly alive. He told himself with amazement that nothing was altered since he had driven that night to Bob's house.

To Bob, on the contrary, there was n't a tree or a hedge or a bevy of rocks that looked the same. He had been through the Valley of the Shadow and the light of the moon made him

blink. His feet dragged a little. He felt older and as though he had lost blood.

They went round the veranda to the room that was lighted and saw the two girls waiting together. With drooping head Daisy sat, in a deep armchair, with Margaret on the floor at her feet. They had cried themselves out of tears.

The sight of the woman who had captured his love and retained it even after the earthquake caused by the knowledge of her unfaithfulness turned Bob's face white. Her attitude of despair as she sat with her head in the lap of her friend and one hand lying limp on the floor was like a clarion call to his chivalry. He had forgiven Julian who was his friend. How much more tender he must be with Margaret, who was his wife. With a supreme effort of will and an absolute determination to appear as though he had come through the evening without shell-shock, he went in.

"Well," he said, "here we are, at last."

It was so pathetic an endeavor to be ordinary that it made Julian choke.

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Margaret struggled to her feet at the sound of his voice and looked at him in amazement. She was almost shocked that he should take so lightly the truth that she had worked so hard to hide. And Daisy got up too, with something of the same feeling, but she, with a swift examination of Julian's face, saw at once that this queer cheerfulness was subterfuge. Bob was not going to let Margaret suffer any more.

"We've kept you up very late," he went on. "You're tired, and so is Daisy. Good night, old man. Good night, my dear." And he took Margaret's hand and led her out to the veranda, across the lawn and away. It was quickly done and bravely done, all dramatics scrupulously avoided. And when they were out of sight Daisy crept up to Julian and stood in front of him.

"What does this mean?" she asked.

"Friend that sticketh closer than a brother," he said — "I'm let off, Daisy. You've got me back. Oh, my God, what can I do for you and that man?"

She went into his arms and felt his tears drop

hotly on her face. She would like to have cried out, "Oh Julian, Julian, let's begin again. Don't let's go on any longer with an empty house. It's big enough for children and we are young and there's time to live it down." But she held him tight instead and let him off, too. Somehow Julian was one of the men who was always let off. But under his tears, which she had never felt before, she thought that she saw his passage out of vanity and shallowness into humbleness and sincerity. With a greater joy than had been hers for a long time, she felt that Julian had come back a man, with new eyes for life. It was an ill wind that blew nobody any good. The trouble in Quaker Hill might have a lesson in it for others as well as Margaret.

And when he kissed her hope burned into a little flame.

Bob and Margaret followed the path just taken by Gilbert and Elsa and by Eric and Mary Miller, — the short cut across the long grass and over the bridge above the chattering stream and through the little wood of middle-

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aged trees and so to the angle of the road from which they could see their house on its solid foundation of rocks. The light in the den was like a beacon to sea-tossed mariners.

The door was open, and still without a word Bob drew Margaret in and turned on the light. The Teddy bear on the oak chest was patiently guarding the silver scarf.

"You must be hungry," said Bob. "I am too. Wait in the dining room and I'll go and forage."

And when he disappeared through the swing door into the kitchen, Margaret went into the dining room and lit some candles. How soon would he do something or say something to let her know what he was thinking? It was agony to wait. She would rather be struck than left in suspense.

He brought in fruit and crackers and ginger ale and went back, whistling, for knives and glasses and the thing to open the bottles with that invariably hid itself in strange places. Under the anxious endeavor to be normal, he allowed his imagination no play. He wanted

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most intensely to spare Margaret from any further emotion. But he knew very little about women.

“A good day for golf,” he said. “Nothing like a fine Sunday. Lunch at the Club, won’t you; otherwise I shall see nothing of you till the evening.”

“Yes,” said Margaret.

“I’m in a foursome with Julian, Gilbert and young Eric. The last time we played” — he stopped short and put his hand up to his head — “I mean, in the match this afternoon, we halved on the eighteenth.” It seemed like an episode in a former life.

“He’s coming to it now,” she thought.

But he opened the tin of crackers and put it in front of her. His hand was unsteady and his eyes at the back of his head, and his thick hair almost as unruly as it used to be in those old good days when he and Julian had listened to the wash of the sea and dreamed dreams. Into none of them, then or later, had even the faintest shadow of this trouble hung for an instant.

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“I heard to-night that there are to be two weddings in the middle of next month,” he said. “There won’t be many bachelors in Quaker Hill soon. Good chaps, Gilbert and Eric. I wish them luck.”

“Now, now,” she thought.

But he went off deliberately at another tangent, little knowing that his blundering simple attempts to spare Margaret’s feelings were putting her on the rack. And for twenty minutes he kept up a strained and painful monologue on a dozen trivial subjects, finally putting everything back into the kitchen before turning off the lights and locking the door and going upstairs. And then he turned off and went into his den, with a grotesque attempt at song. It was all terribly clumsy,—one of those mistaken efforts that are meant for the best but which only succeed in achieving the worst.

Once in the room in which so recently he had gone down into Hell, he drew up short and asked himself what he was to do and say, because he had caught something in Margaret’s

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eyes that stirred the very vitals of his sympathy. Love had decided which of the crossroads he was to take, but it came to him then, letting his imagination go, that if he and Margaret were to enter it successfully, they must stand together over the grave of a trouble buried deep into the earth and lay on the stone of it a wreath of forgiveness. And so, immediately, he went out again, called Margaret, and tiptoed with her to the side of the little bed in which Bob Junior lay with the flush of sleep on his cheeks.

And then what he had come to say, he could n't say, because all the tears in his heart flooded his words. But he turned and caught the mother of his boy into his arms and held her there in a silence infinitely more eloquent than speech.

And the spirits of those who loved them both smiled and touched their heads.



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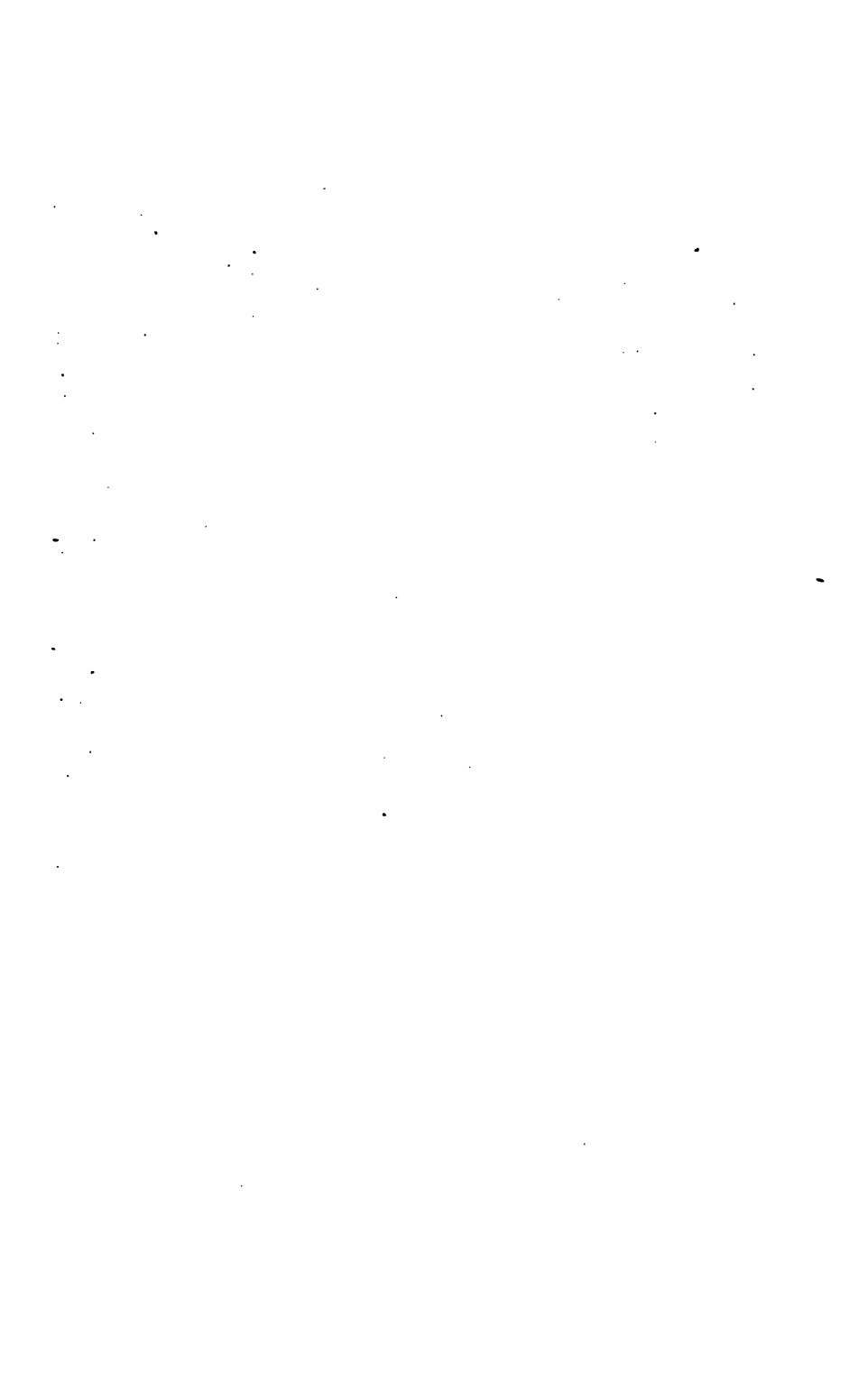
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